
The PRIMAL
LURE
V·E·ROE

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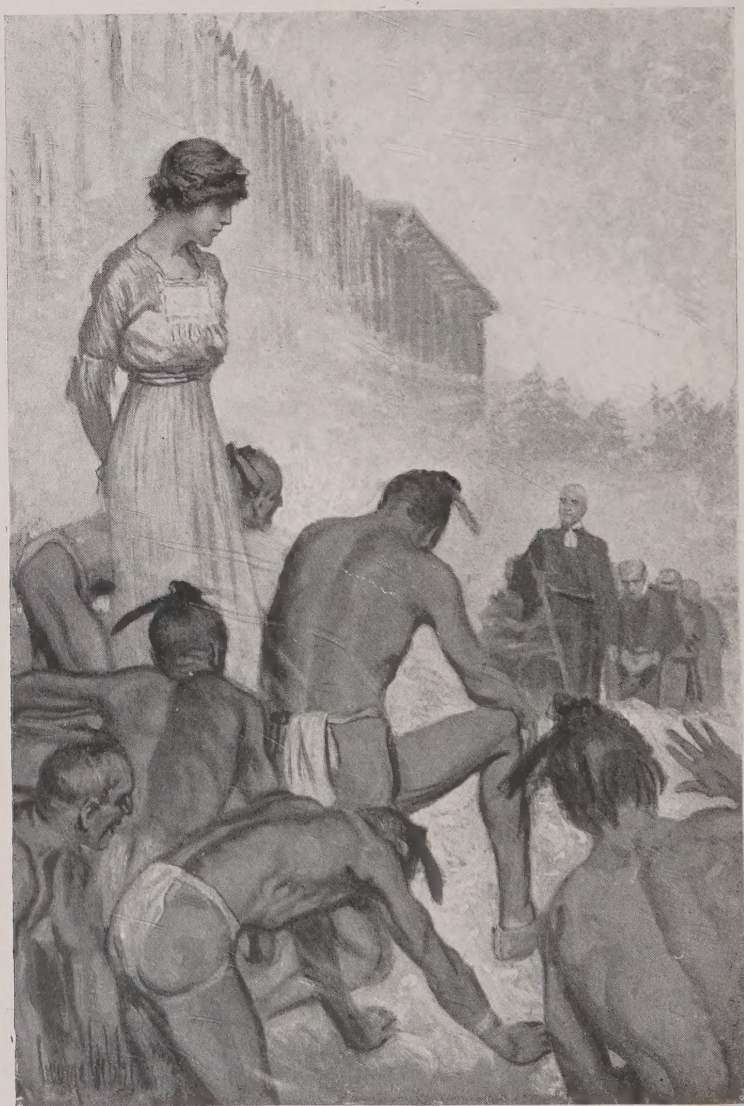
THE PRIMAL LURE





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THE DEEP HEART OF THAT FAR-OFF SKY SEEMED, IN THAT MOMENT,
TO FILL THE SOUL OF THE GIRL WITH A QUIET PEACE.

THE PRIMAL LURE

A Romance of Fort LuCerne

BY
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THE HEART OF NIGHT WIND, Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
GEORGE GIBBS



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THE PRIMAL LURE

CHAPTER I

A THIEF

"THIS," said McConnel the Factor, grimly, "is the thief!" With a circular sweep of his powerful left hand that sent her spinning, he flung into the midst of the group of men, a girl.

She whirled, staggered, nearly fell, caught at a hastily interposed hand, righted herself and fronted him.

"You lie, M'sieu!" she said.

She closed her lips and stood where he had flung her, tense, scarcely breathing, one hand clenched at her side.

McConnel's face was black with fury, but a rage that matched it faced him in her eyes, the bloodless compression of her lips, the fluttering spread and intake of her nostrils, the pinched white line at their base.

With the sudden and theatrical advent of the two, an amazed silence fell upon the group of men gathered by the stockade wall in the soft twilight of a late spring night. Behind them twinkled the lights of the settlement of Fort Lu

Cerne, a far-reaching arm of that friend and conqueror of the sullen solitudes of the great North, the Hudson's Bay Company. On every hand beyond the protecting wall of the post the forest shouldered grudgingly, grimly silent in its everlasting majesty, waiting with patience until Time should heal this small scar made by the encroaching hand of man in its primeval heart. Within the stockade huddled cosily the snug cabins of those who followed the long trails, voyageurs and trappers, soldiers of that force whose slowly creeping progress was doing much to subdue the wilderness — the stolid, log-built Headquarters of the Company, a veritable blockhouse in its squat strength, and on a tiny rise near the western wall a small edifice whose split-slab roof bore aloft a crude wooden cross. Amazement and consternation gripped the little group. The babble of talk ceased.

McConnel, usually a more than quiet man, was roused by that unreasoning anger which at rare intervals seizes the silent nature. He breathed hard and a deep scowl drew between the steel-blue eyes. Speech had fallen upon him.

"There has been talk and grumbling," he said harshly, "against the Company. I have heard, though you thought me deaf. Now the book of accounts is stolen that there may be no proof of

the bad winter past. The Company gave you your debt,—how would you have lived without?—and now you betray it. And for agent you send this brazen hussy with the high head and daring fingers,—but I caught her at her tricks, alone in the big room, searching my desk for more to steal, perhaps Courier's contract, or the promise of Fletcher down in writing, and I have brought her to face you. You thought to save yourselves because of a woman, eh? By God, she shall pay the price in full!"

The Factor raised his right fist and shook it toward the soft evening sky.

"Ye'll fash ye'r sel's befoor I'm done. I'll teach this post a lesson!"

In the stress of his passion his speech reverted to its birth-tongue. The girl, standing in silence throughout this unusual burst, suddenly swung her weight forward on her right foot, lifting her head and her magnificently rounded breast a bit higher with a certain loose grace of movement.

"M'sieu the Factor has lied again," she said, and her voice, rich and full, was a whimpering blade of scorn, "no one sent me into the room at Headquarters and none knew of my going. The post is without blame. I alone am my own master. M'sieu may do what he pleases with me."

The ineffable scorn of her words and manner

bit into the consciousness of all, and not least of those to feel it was McConnel himself. It roused his boiling fury to overflow. He reached and caught her by the arm.

"I'll put you out of mischief until that book is found," he swore, "or know the reason!"

By this time figures could be seen running toward the centre of excitement from every direction. Little Jean Mercier, hanging at his father's heels listening to the group's discussion of the mystery of the disappearance of the accounts, had fled to his mother, cooking supper at her fireplace, with the startling cry of:

"It is Lois Le Moyne who is thief of the Factor's book!"

And Marie, as became a right-minded woman, had alarmed her neighbours before setting out herself.

As McConnel caught the girl, roughly with the force of his anger, and started toward Headquarters, the men found their voices and their wits.

"She speaks truth, Mr. McConnel," cried young Pierre Vernaise, pushing forward among the men, his bright cap on the back of his curls and his handsome eyes troubled, "whatever discontent there has been over the new rules, it has not sent Lois into the big room a thief. She speaks the truth."

There was a certain dignity in his impulsive defence, a faith in her which did not wait for justification. Lois flashed him a grateful look.

A babble of protest arose.

"Lois Le Moyne,"—"We did not send her"—
—"Bah! A woman for agent"—"Let her go, McConnell,"—"It is the outrage——"

Such excited ejaculations reached him in a mingling of sound and inflection, but McConnell was stirred to the bottom and something had to answer. That it was a woman mattered not at all. The Company, which was McConnell's god, had been insulted, they had dared to oppose its mandates. Now someone would pay, and pay dearly. As the turning group strung out to face the post, it was met by those who had heard the news, running.

Among the foremost was old Jaques Le Moyne, tottering on his unstable legs, his weak eyes bulging with fright.

"Lois!" he shrieked, seeing her in the Factor's iron grasp, "Lois!"

The girl, quiescent until now, walking with head up and eyes flashing, at the old man's cry gave a sudden sinuous twist which left her free with a dull red print of the Factor's fingers upon her wrist. She faced him defiantly.

"I don't need that," she said. Then she caught

the withered form of old Le Moyne in her arms. Over his shaking shoulder she flashed a glance around that took in the faces of the crowd.

"I did not take the book," she said simply, "and I call on you to see that they give him my debt."

This trembling old man, long since past his usefulness at the trapping, fit only to sit in the sun-glow of the short summers or the fire-glow of the long winters, dreaming over the high days of his youth, was the one known weakness of this girl's imperious nature. It was with a fierce affection that she toiled cunningly at the brilliant beadwork, carrying a good account on that same lost book of the Factor's because of the fact that there was not, in all the country south of the Ojibways to the Northwest and the Crees beyond the Ragged Lands, another so skilled in the intricacies of turn and pattern, of colour and design. It was on Old Jaques that the account was lavished, in warm coats with scarlet stripes for the cold winter, in tobacco and canned tidbits brought with much hardship by the dog train which made the far post of Fort Lu Cerne only once while the long frost held, and which, as might be supposed, came at the price of luxuries.

Now she held him, whimpering like a child,

tight against her strong young breast, and a light, strange and boding, began to flicker in her sombre eyes. McConnel stood scowling heavily. His habitual silence was falling upon him, wrapping him about as with a garment. The small group of participators in this little scene had grown to the entire population of the post, gathered close, excited, tense, ready to take fire in a second, as is the way with those whose lives are cast together in the far places. Resentment against the Factor, sullen and leashed for many months, leaped into the faces pushing near in the rose-hued dusk. Had the girl spoken a word, caught the psychological moment at the turn, given to the half-conscious thing a thrill of life, there would have been added to the history of Fort Lu Cerne a new page whereon riot and perhaps bloodshed would have held place. But she only looked down at Old Jaques, loosened his palsied clasp, and putting one arm around his wizened shoulders, led the way toward Headquarters. The crowd fell sullenly in behind and a silence, as tense, as waiting, as expectant as that within the silent forest beyond the stockade, settled down, broken only by the slip of the men's moccasins of moosehide, or the rustle of the women's skirts.

McConnel stalked ahead, still savage with unbridled anger.

It was noticed by more than one in the hushed crowd that Lois Le Moyne, touching the highest point of studied insolence, gaited her pace to the slow steps of her father, thereby holding back the progress of the Factor himself.

In the big room at Headquarters, wide, long, low-ceiled and hung with giant beams, all across the farther end of which and piled to the top were stored the winter's catch of furs, meagre enough in truth, a light was burning.

It was toward this room that the populace turned, expecting they knew not what of inquisition, of accusation, of possible discovery, which could not mean the girl, ever haughty and reserved, dwelling within herself, but ever straight-laced and accurate as a man in her dealings. No one but McConnel, who had found her in the big room, doubted Lois Le Moyne.

But it was not to the lighted room that the Factor led them.

At the angle of the great house he turned smartly to the right.

The populace drew many breaths, of amaze, of anger, and disgust. That way stood the fort's guardhouse, a low, sinister building whose stockaded walls relieved by but one barred window, dark, dismal, impregnable, had held the one murderer which Lu Cerne had known, Cumac, who

killed Jean Demary when the post was young and McKilgore was the first Factor.

Before it he stopped, drew forth his jangling keys, unlocked and threw inward the heavy door that creaked. With his other hand he caught Lois once more by the shoulder. McConnel in this mood was more than a match for the populace of Fort Lu Cerne.

"In with you, hussy!" he cried hoarsely.

Old Jaques broke the tension with a cracked cry, high, frightened, pitiful. Among the people there was but one voice raised, so completely at the last had the Scotchman's personality dominated them, the voice of Marcel Roque, who, kindly soul, had never feared man or power.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried, aghast.

McConnel flung the girl into the dark of the place, caught the door, clanged it shut, turned the grating key and faced his people.

"Go home!" he said, and his voice had lost its harshness. It had slid to a cool quiet that was a great deal worse.

CHAPTER II

A CHAMPION

THE voyageurs, followed by their women, who held their lips shut upon the odd whispers choking for free utterance, melted away into the dusk amid the cabins. Dark had fallen quickly as it does where the solemn forest swings its sombre mantle of shadows close up to the abodes of men.

There was an unwonted silence after the first babel of sound at the beginning of the happening. It was as if they had rushed into an unfamiliar place in the dark, only to stand affrighted at what they saw at dawn. The grimness of McConnel's action had assumed another light when he had actually thrown Lois into the guardhouse. No one had thought his anger so deep as that. They had never understood him.

To-night the feeling of uncertainty which had ever followed at the Factor's heels changed into something more. What it was no one could have said. Fear, probably, and an uncanny dislike, a growling blame that skulked like a coward in every consciousness. An uneasy, half formed

knowledge that they should not have permitted the thing to be, held the men mute.

Only the irrepressible Marcel Roque, holding the frantic Old Le Moyne in the hollow of her arm, petting him with voice and hand, dared to break the strange hush.

“Mother of Mercy!” she said aloud and her voice carried clear across the cool night, “Mother of Mercy!—there, there, Jaques, it is only that the Factor is one more fool than God made, having laid aside his wits himself,—is Fort Lu Cerne but a string of starved dogs under the master’s hand in the long winter? — Mon Dieu! had I been a man this night there would have been more than one to say whether Lois is a common thief, to see who should lie in the dark of the guardhouse. Eustace Roque, I am shame for the day I married you! Brave? Bah! You men! One man, and you let him rule as a king, all because behind him is the H. B. Company! Mon Dieu! For men who can stand alone!”

McConnel, going in at the door of the big room, stopped and listened. The blackness of his features clouded a little deeper. Then he entered and closed the doors.

The lights in the huddled cabins flickered uneasily a while, sputtering against faces grave with the mystery and tense with the excitement, then

one by one, seemingly with a common consent, they winked out, leaving the post hushed and dark, but under its odd quiet there was a ruffle of feeling that seethed beneath many a blanket and skin until the silver of day shot up over the forest.

And what of the girl thrust so roughly into disgrace and the eerie post prison?

When McConnel shot her forward into the darkness she stumbled and nearly fell. In throwing out her hands to right herself they came in contact with a heavy table. She caught it and came to poise, panting, quiet, her lips open in the night and a deadly curse hanging breathless behind them.

The fury of her face, kindled into a living fire by the man's touch, blazed forth in the pitch dark. Her eyes burned red and green and yellow like those of a great cat in the shadow of the forest, and her breath came softly. Where old Le Moyne had got the girl's mother, or what that mother had been, no one at Fort Lu Cerne had ever known. Now, in the silent blackness of the deserted guardhouse, standing erect and tall and strong, her wide eyes blazing with an unspeakable passion, her breath coming softly, she was strangely like her mother. Old Jaques, could he have seen her then, would have trembled with the memory of certain days when his old blood was

young and he had done some daring deeds for a woman who looked like that.

Until the last step of the retreating populace had died away, leaving a great blank of quiet after the whirl of these quick adventurings, Lois stood so, poised, held without the quiver of a muscle, her whole body given over to the passion that rode it, a silent, breathing, dangerous thing. In those still moments a birth was taking place within her, deep down in unsuspected caverns of her nature a thing stirred, moved, raised its hooded head and came to life. McConnel had made the worst mistake of his existence. Presently she slid her hand along the table, the stare of her wide eyes fluttered, broke and she drew a good deep breath.

With a sigh, wholly of relief, not pensive, the girl gave herself a shake, lifting her head with a jerk, closed her lips and flung her shoulders straight.

She walked around the table, feeling with one hand before her, went softly until she met the wall and then began an exploration of her prison.

A rude bunk built against the logs and still holding the tumbled blankets of Cumac's last sleep, a blank stretch, a stool which caused her to stumble in the darkness, then a shelf with a bucket. Lois dipped her hand into it. It was half full of old

water. Then on around the walls. The journey was unbroken until once again she encountered the corner of the bunk. But the girl was satisfied. She tore out the musty coverings and threw them on the floor. At the bottom was a bear skin, the fur turned down and hanging through between the close slattings of the bed. This she pulled up, shook with the vigour of her young strength, wrapped it about her and stretched herself on the hard couch. Before the awed whisperings of those in the sanctuary of their own homes had died away, she was sound asleep. Her only thought of anxiety was of Old Jaques, but him she trusted to Marcel Roque. The anger that had shaken her like a dried lily stemming the fury of the winter blasts had coiled itself calmly away within her to await a distant time. So Fort Lu Cerne lay quiet under the soft spring sky dotted with its many stars.

By early dawn, however, it was awake in every corner of its environs. The first excitement of the night before had returned, drawing in its train a bravery that was spawn of the bright day. At the public well, near the great gate of the post that opened to the east, a group of men gathered by one and one, coming with the buckets for the morning's water.

Big Jean Mercier coming first, lingered without

fear of Marie's sharp tongue this morning. Presently he was joined by Eustace Roque and France Thebau, and from his cabin at the western wall, Palo Le Roc, who had that winter moved Tessa down from the Ragged Lands, that she might be near to womankind in her time of trial that was to come.

Big Jean's sleepy eyes that were always kindly, were wide with the unaccustomed thought that had kept him awake all night.

He cast over the faces of the others quickly as they joined him.

"Bo' jou'!" he said.

Palo Le Roc, great of stature, black browed, handsome, whose tongue never wasted a word, took the quivering thing that was in the minds of all and laid it bare to the morning sun.

"It was a coward's trick that M'sieu the Factor did, and it is in the heart of us to declare the rebellion," he said calmly.

France Thebau glanced around nervously. A strange thing had happened once to one Ceurmél at the lower post of McKenzie for a plot against its Factor. But big Jean's eyes sparkled and leaped quickly to Palo's words.

"Bien! M'sieu Le Roc!" he cried, "Fort Lu Cerne may be lean with the grip of a hard winter, but it has not turned thief to hide its poverty,

neither have its maids lost the right of justice! The Factor goes too far."

At that moment another comer joined the group by the well, young Pierre Vernaise whose black eyes, the despair of half the maids of the post, held still their trouble of the night. The smile was gone from his merry face. The last words of Jean reached him as he came.

"A damn sight too far, Jean," he said swiftly, the inheld excitement breaking through his voice, "Marcel spoke true when she spoke of the string of dogs beneath the master's hand,—The H. B. Company is father and mother, also the unquestioned law north of Henriette,—but Lois Le Moyne is beyond the law."

A little silence fell with his words. How well they all knew that more than one in the group could have told. That Lois Le Moyne was beyond all law had been patent to the post since first Old Jaques had brought her there, a wee frowning child whose haughty nature had made room for none, whose straight man-strength as she grew to womanhood had held her silently apart, depending upon none for associate, self-sufficient, capable, strange,—beyond the law of youth within its merrymaking, of social intercourse, beyond the law of love, as the young men of the post knew well, for there was none in whose veins the red

blood of young life leaped who had not paid tribute of longing to her sombre eyes, her cool dark cheeks, her straight red lips and the thick braids of hair, blue-black, piled high on her lifted head.

That Lois Le Moyne had been found in the Factor's room had no significance. That fact in itself was descriptive of the girl.

No one but McConnel himself considered it. The post saw only the Factor's action.

The trappers set down their pails, and while the women waited impatiently in the cabins, many words went back and forth, the skulking blame of the one in command of the post crept out with its ugly head in view, and as one and another was added to the group, presently it grew to all the masculine portion of the populace, save only Old Jaques trembling by Marcel's hearth and the Factor grimly at work already in his big room.

The Scotchman's face had set into lines that meant more than anyone in Fort Lu Cerne could have guessed, and his steely eyes were steady.

As the crowd by the well broke up, excitement was sitting leashed on every shoulder. Action was leaping for liberty in their breasts. As they separated the cool voice of Palo Le Roc stopped the eddying of the breaking mass a moment.

"But look you," he said justly, "we go to Lois for her denial first."

But long before they had eaten their frugal meal and gathered themselves again, one had already been to Lois,—Marcel, who tapped at the barred window.

“Lois!” she called, peering into the darkness still within, for the red bars of the morning sun were just shooting up from the green sea of the big woods when she came in her indignant eagerness.

The girl slid off the bunk and went to the window. Marcel, peering anxiously, saw no change in her face, only the soft look of healthy sleep.

To Marcel only of all the women of the post had Lois ever deigned a relaxation of the cold hauteur that set her apart.

Now she smiled a little, a slow cool smile that swept the black fringe flickering across the deeper darkness of her eyes.

“It is over early, Marcel,” she said, “you should have slept another hour.”

“And you in this hole of a prison? I am of better friendship than that, Lois. Mon Dieu! It is dark in there. And he put you here! A stupid fool, that Factor! A fool without the grace to know it! But here is your breakfast,—the breast of a duck that Eustace caught but yesterday at the Black Lakes, and ash-cakes. The legs I save for the small Solierre when he shall wake.” Uncon-

sciously Marcel's voice softened as she spoke the name. It always did when she mentioned her one child, a wee little boy whose pretty head with its dark curls and wistful eyes was too heavy a weight for the poor misshapen shoulders which supported it.

"Also the tankard of black tea."

She pushed the cakes, wrapped in a white cloth, through the bars, talking rapidly, turned the plate with the duck sidewise and slid it in, then poured the tea into a tiny tin cup.

"It will revive you after the hard night. *Merci!* The sleep,—how was it possible? And the dark!" She was rattling on after her kindly, excitable manner. Lois took the things and caught a break in her words.

"Jaques pere, Marcel?" she asked.

"Wearied a bit the fore part of the night, but slept well after. Ease your mind of Jaques. There is room in the cabin and to spare. Also I make the herb brew that he likes. He will take no harm for the few days until you are out of this. But *Bien!* I forget. The men gather but now beside the well at the Big Gate. I think that the Factor will have more than a girl to handle with his rough hands if he does not loose you, Lois. *Mon Dieu!* They have waited too long already! To creep to their cabins like the dogs

when the lash sings, cowed by the sound of the Factor's voice! He is one pig, — a common pig with his thick wits and hardness. The duck is good? Pass back the plate, Lois. I go to watch the child awake. Keep up good heart. There will be more to this than was to be."

Marcel wrapped the plate in the cloth and took the cup, preparing to leave. She turned back as she was going.

"But how was it so unfortunate that he came upon you in Headquarters, *ma chère*?" asked this good friend in simple wonderment, "what took you there?"

For the first time the girl Lois showed a flicker of consciousness. She dropped her eyes and a slow flush spread up across her throat and stained the darkness of her smooth cheek. But only for a moment. Then she looked up and straight into the face of her friend.

"What took me there, Marcel, had not to do with the Factor's book. It was not wrong, this I tell you, but for the rest, — that concerns myself."

She said no more, added no word of justification, just stood by the barred window with her hands quietly folded on the ledge, but the light in her eyes was not due to the splendour of gold and rose and palest blue that was beginning to riot

up the morning sky. It grew and mounted into a sparkle of flame that waited and hung while Marcel took in the import of her words, a sentient flame that quivered a short moment in the quick crisis.

For a breathless space the two women stood so, looking deep into each other's souls. For Lois that was no great task, for the heart of Marcel Roque was as fresh and open as her plain face, but for Marcel it was something more. Yet what she saw in the mysterious recesses of the girl, even though it were but a glimpse, dimly lit with instinctive knowledge, was sufficient. She smiled, dispelling the momentary amazement of her face.

"I need no more, Lois," she said quietly, "and now I must get back to Eustace and the child."

The flame of Lois' eyes dropped gently down, as gently as anything about her could be said to do so.

"You are a good friend, Marcel," she said, "and that is a rare thing."

CHAPTER III

THE FACTOR

McCONNEL sat in the big room. He was busy over rows of figures, long columns of items which told of so many packs of furs brought at such times by this one and that, of supplies given out to this one and that, of obligations due the H. B. Company, of payment to be made to this and that one among the trappers, and he was doing it all from the illumination of a memory whose orderly archives held record of most of the doings of Fort Lu Cerne in the space of time that he had been in command.

Thirty-six hours had elapsed since the discovery of the loss of the great book that never left the huge pine desk with its polish of the wear of many hands, and he was already at work at the re-organisation of the accounts. The heavy lines were still between his sandy brows and the blue eyes beneath them were sharp and uncompromising. It was no small thing, the task that he had set himself, but it was the best to be done in the situation. Such an account would be questioned, he knew, and it would not stand authentic, yet he knew

the people of Fort Lu Cerne and on many of them he counted.

It was a pleasant room, this great square place with its huge piles of furs, its great moose heads and elk antlers, rudely dried and mounted after the fashion of unskilled craft, its wide, low-browed, mouthing fireplace at the south side, its giant beams and windows set deep in its two-foot walls. The big doors led in from the east and all the south part of it was free of all who came and went on the various business of the post. But across the upper portion, breast high to a man and having in the centre a gate that might be locked, there ran a solid pine partition, a heavy railing topped by a wide smooth slab, which reached from wall to wall.

Within this enclosure sat the desk of the Factor with its back against the railing, and here no one entered save only the Factor himself or some rare visitor from Henriette bent on the business of the H. B. Company. It was here within the enclosure that McConnel had come upon the girl Lois the night before, bending forward in the early dusk of the room above the desk itself.

If any thought of her, waiting his pleasure in the fear-haunted guardhouse, came to the mind of the man it was not visible in his face. He went methodically on with his work, sorting and tabu-

lating with wonderful accuracy the long list of accounts. So deeply absorbed in the task was he that he did not hear the opening of the big doors nor the entrance of those who came filing in until they filled the whole space of the open room. It was not until they reached the rail before him that McConnel looked up. He met squarely the eyes of Big Jean Mercier, Palo Le Roc and the young Pierre Vernaise.

Within his own was a quiet readiness for any development. He expected a crisis. Instead he met a sullen, wondering defeat, that was, nevertheless, but a shifting mask before a grim determination.

For this is what happened when the men gathered after the morning meal and went in a body for the spoken word of Lois Le Moyne to the guardhouse. Le Roc for his cool and steady balance was chosen spokesman.

Arrived, he had addressed her where she stood calmly at the window to face the populace.

"Bon jour, Lois," he said.

"Bon jour, M'sieu."

Palo went simply to the point.

"We would go to the Factor to demand your release, Ma'amselle, but first we would have your testimony of clearance. We would tell the reason for which you went to Headquarters." The ques-

tion was but a matter of form, as simply put as it had been by Marcel herself, of so small account as to the uncertainty of its answer that already those on the outskirts of the crowd, beyond the curiosity to get a glimpse of Lois through the bars, were filled but with the business of getting on to the Factor, some of them moving off in their eagerness and the strength that comes of numbers and a certain purpose.

What was the effect, then, when the girl, once again flushing under the tawny darkness of her skin, dropped her eyes for the second time in her life?

"M'sieu Le Roc," she said bravely, lifting her head after that one moment, "I cannot tell you."

Every tongue in the crowd was still. The faces of the three men close to the window fell into blank wonder. If a giant hand out of the heavens had fallen upon them, cupping them all in its covering palm, there would not have been a more stunned silence. They had not even thought of the reason for which Lois had gone to Headquarters. They would probably never have thought of it had it not been for the resolution of the masculine portion of the post that no woman should lie within the guardhouse, and the necessity of giving it to McConnel in the line of regular defence.

Now this unexpected answer suddenly posted it

huge before their more than amazed minds. They stood without speech, the foremost facing her blankly, those in the rear and out at the edges craning wonderingly.

For a moment it held, that silent wonder, then a wimple of change passed over the faces crowded close, a different look, as the face of a clearing changes when a cloud drives over it high above trailing its delicate shadow. Once more the flame had flickered up in the eyes of the girl, once more she waited as she had waited for the change in the face of Marcel Roque, and this time it did not drop gently down as it had then. Now it burned suddenly higher, a dancing light that leapt and grew. The hands folded on the sill curled tight around each other.

“M’sieu Le Roc,” she said clearly, “you have my great appreciation for that you would demand my release, but what I did in the big room concerns, — myself.” And turning from the window she deliberately walked away.

So that is what brought them into the presence of the Factor dazed, already half defeated, crippled in their purpose. Yet they would have Lois loose, no matter what of sudden suspicion, of staggering conjecture, of helpless bewilderment had begun to flicker in the minds of all with the passing of the shadow of the little cloud.

"M'sieu," said Palo Le Roc straightly across the high railing, "we ask that you turn out of the guardhouse Lois Le Moyne."

McConnel did not lay down his pen, merely pausing in his work as if the interruption were but a matter of moment.

"Has the book of accounts been found?" he asked.

"No, M'sieu," said Palo.

"Then find it!" rapped McConnel, falling to on the long columns without another word. The crowd stood still. McConnel's pen scratched on the paper. It was a little sound, but it loosened the breath in the mighty breast of Big Jean, which came forth with a whistle of rage. He leaned forward across the railing, reached out a great hand and the spirit of revolt was once more close to the surface in the scent of blood, but Palo Le Roc flung him back. He turned to the men.

"The guardhouse is but a step," he said quietly.

They needed something of its like, that quiet word. Tension was peering from their eyes again. The shifting emotions of the past night and the morning had strained them ready for action. Now they turned with loosed tongues, streaming out of the big doors, jamming, pushing in their haste, eager.

Out of the Factor's room they bulged, a mob of giant men grown in the forests and among the desolate reaches of the Lost Country, black of brow and eye, strong, sinewy, a power for one man to fear if they forsook the law for which he stood. And that one man sat still at the desk behind the railing of the pine partition watching them go while the cold steel of his eyes hardened to a colder blue.

From the doors of the cabins scattered around the post the women watched them gather at the guardhouse. In the lead was Big Jean Mercier, of an account now that action, not words, was needed.

Close behind him with flushed face was young Pierre Vernaise. A girl standing in Marie's doorway, frowned and tossed a pretty head.

"It is strange, Marie, is it not, how the turning away of a flaunting face is more to a man than a willing smile?" she asked.

"A face like Lois', Jaqua, yes, of certainty," said Marie, absently, her excited eyes on the surging mass at the prison doors.

From the northern wall a man came running, two, three, four of them, between their bent bodies jerking forward a great log, long and tough of fibre.

"Bien!" roared the deep voice of Big Jean,

catching a quick place at its head. Like ants covering a scrap of offal in an ash heap, the black mass of the men covered the timber.

"They will batter down the guardhouse door!" shrieked Marie, "Mary Mother! They have all gone mad!"

"Hold your tongue, Marie," cried Marcel Roque, her merry eyes alight with battle, one hand clenched into a goodly fist, the other straying softly on the silken head of the little boy whose wistful face peered around her skirts. "They are but doing what they should have done last night!"

"One!" came the heavy boom of Big Jean, and they saw the long black wedge draw back.

"Two!" It swung a moment, gathering momentum.

"Three!"

With a sound like a cannon it shot against the guardhouse door. A woman screamed somewhere. With inheld breath the women watched the mass draw back again. Once more came the thunder of the deep "One, two," — but before the last cry had left the lips of the leader a new voice rang loud across the morning air.

"Stop!"

Framed in an open window in the north wall of the Headquarters stood McConnel, his stern face livid and set, the narrow pin points of his

contracted eyes looking down the barrel of a gun trained on the mass of voyageurs.

"Scatter!" he cried in the momentary silence that fell. Any man among them at another time would have known the danger in that voice and done its bidding. Now the sleeping flame, the smart of unjust accusation, the excitement, above all the firing touch of a woman in disgrace, pumped the blood of impulse to the drowning of reason.

Two words, spoken, held each a turning of the mob.

"Scatter!" cried Palo Le Roc, seeing with that quickness which stamps the general, the better point, and

"Three!" shouted Pierre Vernaise with the reckless abandon of youth and the courage which knows not fear.

Above all sounds carried his exulting dare. It fired that thing which in all hardy men lies ever sleeping with one ear pricked, the love of venture and the desperate chance, and with a whoop they charged again.

As the log struck the door with its hollow boom, the crack of the gun flared sharply across its roar. The front end of the ram sagged suddenly out of the hands of Big Jean, who lurched across it among the feet of the surging men. The danger in the Factor's voice had crystallised.

Then indeed reason leaped back to her throne. Those who had but a moment before been but part of a lawless whole, loosened and separated, shaking each man himself out of the mass, until presently there was no mass, only a crowd of sane men gathering around with amazed faces to view what had been done.

The crumpled heap across the log head lay silent. Palo Le Roc, always sane, paying no heed to aught else, knelt beside it. There was no word spoken in the crowd. In the window above and behind them the Factor stood, without motion or speech, his gun levelled steadily. Only of them all, young Pierre Vernaise held to his wit and his spirit. He pushed through and facing the window shook his fist at the Factor.

"Liar! Coward! Bastard!" he cried, inviting his death.

But they were yet to learn that McConnel was a man of principle who did not shoot from inclination. He paid no heed to the fiery youth.

"Le Roc," again came that ringing voice, smooth, confident, strong, "you and DeBois take home that man I have shot. The rest will go away in orderly manner. Don't delay. I mean it."

CHAPTER IV

QUIET TIMES

THE forepart of the spring had worn away. The soft green of the forest deepened day by day to a hardier shade. In the crevices of the stockade tiny, timid flowers peered shyly forth lifting their adoring little faces to the sun, while the great trees, bounding the horizon of Fort Lu Cerne on every side, whispered contentedly in the gentle breeze that came up from the south.

Things in the post had fallen into a settled quietude. The coming idleness of the summer season spread its lazy wings over the populace, which lounged and gossiped as was its wont, only now the talk was veiled, an uneasy passing to and fro of thoughts which shunned the light of open speech.

In the big room at Headquarters the Factor sat at his endless tasks, or went back and forth among them, silent, stern of face, unafraid, a mystery with his uncanny power of personality, and those who had braved him once to their undoing kept free of his hand and tongue. The youths and maidens laughed together at the well, went be-

yond the confines of the fort in merry parties, coming home laden with the wild green things of the forest, or danced in the open nights by the light of the leaping fire. Only one among them lowered by himself, untouched by smile or coquetry, Pierre Vernaise, who had developed for the first time in his carefree life a sadness that had its seat beneath the surface. To the blandishments of pretty Jaqua Bleaurot he turned an ungallant shoulder.

And pretty Jaqua, pouting out her crimson under lip, carried her grievance to Marie Mercier, tending patiently beside the bed which held the emaciated form of Big Jean, pitiable remainder left by the Factor's bullet.

"Is it that I am of the ugliness unpardonable, Marie?" she demanded. "I, who have had the pick and choosing of all the youth in the post?"

Marie only smiled, and presently, — "You must remember, Jaqua," she said, "the face of Lois Le Moyne, and that she is still in the guard-house."

To which the girl frowned and made no answer.

The weeks had come and crawled away, bringing their added breath of warmth to the soft air, their quota of brighter gold to the sunlight, their sense of joy and well being. Seemingly attuned to the peace and quiet of the post outside, Lois

Le Moyne lived through the golden days of that spring inside the gloomy prison with as calm and unruffled a presence as though she walked the free ways as haughtily as ever. Never an inch did her high head bow beneath the load of her ignominy, never a shadow betrayed her heart on the unreadable page of her face when those who would be friendly paused by the barred window. With the aid of Marcel she had transformed the one bare room into a habitable place. Across the eastern end a long woollen blanket, bearing the stamp of the Hudson's Bay Company, hung as a curtain, formed a place of sanctuary. Here she had installed, bit by bit, those things of her possession which held a place in her strange affections, — a small buckskin bag beaded heavily and holding some few trinkets of the mother she had never known, a book of bright pictures given her once when she was a child by the yellow-haired wife of a trader who had passed through Fort Lu Cerne on a mysterious going into the far places, a prayer-book and a black iron crucifix. The hard bed, what with her own blankets brought from the cabin where she had lived all her life, and those that could be spared from the comfortable stock of Marcel, had been draped into a decent couch. A panther skin and a silver fox lay on the floor.

And Lois herself, the tawny gold of her dusky

beauty paled by the lack of the sun, paced by the hour back and forth across the narrow space, or lay with hands beneath her head on the couch, staring with unseeing dark eyes at the raw rafters. To those who came to the window she turned a cold and uncompromising indifference, set by the small wrinkle of change which had passed over the face of the crowd that first day of her imprisonment. She did not forget, neither did she fail to know what was passing each day among those who were free. Not by word of mouth, though Marcel would have told her each breath, but by an inner thing which felt each quiver of suspicion, every tone of arraignment in the words whispered around the firesides by the women who had never known her. Of all the post two alone were welcome at the window,—Marcel, with her kindly heart and her unwavering faith, and the young Pierre Vernaise, whose girlish lips dropped with her shame that he made his own, impetuously and with a fierce vehemence.

Day by day he made his pilgrimage to the shrine of the girl, bringing those offerings which he judged might find favour in her uncertain sight,—a bunch of pale flowers, delicate green things from the woods, now and then some trophy of his gun or trap, such as the beautiful silver fox skin which lay before her couch. And Lois, obeying some

whim within her, took them and rewarded the giver by more speech than she had ever deigned to bestow on a man before. Of short duration were Pierre's visits to the guardhouse, short and palpitating with a hesitancy that was a stranger to the happy-go-lucky youth whose chiefest fault had ever been his boldness.

Of such import as this were the conversations that passed, —

“Bon jour, Ma'amselle.”

“Bon jour, M'sieu,” from Lois, coming to the opening.

“See, Ma'amselle,” holding for her inspection the delicate blooms, “how the blossoms are beginning to creep at the foot of the wall. Have you fresh water for the little earthen bowl? No? Then it is that I should fill your bucket at the well,” eagerly, “and there is a long runner of the goldentrailer putting forth in the shadow of the church. It would grow finely in a little pail on the window ledge here.” And the next morning the slim plant with its shaky tendrils would be tied to the logs outside. Or, —

“It is of a pleasantness, Ma'amselle, here in the dusk, where the wind is soft and cool. I had rather watch the dancing from this distance if Ma'amselle will permit.” And so Lois, smiling to herself in the dark of her prison, would look at

the graceful head of Pierre leaning against the guardhouse with a softening of the lines around her stubborn lips.

One other of the populace of Fort Lu Cerne there was who spent his very soul at the window, — Old Jaques, shaky of hand and limb, with his sorrow stricken eyes. He would have his breakfast with Marcel, ash cake and wild fowl cooked with thought of his toothless gums, and then he would take his stick and waver over to the squat structure behind Headquarters. Pierre had made him a high stool that he might see the more easily into the place where his child lived, and until noon drove him home again for the one pleasure of his helpless age, he would stay by the window bemoaning that which had fallen with the pitiful iteration of hopeless years.

But one there was again who never so much as passed a step nearer to the prison in his goings and comings, who gave no heed to the girl in durance within its walls, who did not even look toward it more than casually, — the Factor, who held the post under the spell of his cold eyes. At the beginning he had given word to Marcel Roque to furnish Lois with the necessities of existence, but that most loyal friend had turned upon him without fear, scourging him with a flaying tongue.

“Buy my waiting upon Lois? Voila, M’sieu,

you are over bold. Neither she nor I accept the insult of your patronage. You are excuse' from thought of her."

So indeed he seemed to be, literally.

The long columns of accounts, almost exact facsimiles of those on the soiled pages of the missing book, had been finished and shown to those with whom they had to do, in nearly every instance meeting with satisfied approval. McConnel was scrupulously just. He had much leisure these long spring days, but he did not employ it in a search for the missing property of the company. Once each week he unfailingly asked Palo Le Roc, "Has that book been found, Le Roc?" and the answer was as unvaryingly the same, "No, M'sieu."

In the warm twilight of the evenings he sat upon the clean, hard-beaten space of ground before Headquarters, smoking in lonely silence, without companionship. A strang nature was that within his stocky, broad-shouldered body, a nature strong, self-reliant, self-sufficient, as uninviting and contained as that of Lois herself, though in its own peculiar way. He was beholden to none for assistance of any kind. In the small room off the large one to the west of Headquarters, he had his simple living, — rude furnishings of bed and table and chairs, a stool or two, a shelf fastened into the great logs of which the

place was built, which held a row of books. Here he cooked and ate his meals, keeping his things with orderly neatness, and no one was ever known to be admitted here, save again, those rare visitors from the distant post.

One evening in the fifth week of Lois' imprisonment McConnel sat, as was his habit, alone in the soft dusk smoking his pipe beneath the stars.

There was no bon-fire in the space before the church to-night. Over beside the well a half dozen of the young people lingered with merry bursts of laughter, and now and then a song lilting across the scented dark.

In the cabin of Jean Mercier a candle guttered fitfully in the spring air. On her threshold Marcel crooned in a soft ecstasy of exalted love for the child in her lap, while Old Jaques nodded, already half asleep, on the bench. At the guardhouse window murmured the voice of Pierre Vernaise, fallen to a whisper.

Presently out of the enveloping shadows a figure emerged and went confidently across the beaten space before Headquarters, dropping with odd familiarity on the broad sill, a figure which would have drawn comment anywhere outside of Fort Lu Cerne. Slim and small, agile as a cat, yet slow with a languorous grace it sat forward, taking its knees in its arms. By the flare of the Factor's

match, shielded in his palms as he refilled his pipe, it stood out of the dusk with grotesque distinctness. Above the bent shoulders a face peered dreamily, an unlovely gargoyle face with flaccid lips and light eyes, whose pale opaqueness was as vacant of expression as dead glass.

"Bo' jou'," said this visitor, flatly, without grace of politeness.

"Good even', John," returned McConnel kindly.

The pair sat for some time in silence listening to the sounds of the settlement and those that came from time to time out of the illimitable vastness of the mighty woods around. Presently,—

"A stranger comes on the trail from the south, Master," ventured he of the vacant eyes.

"So?" said McConnel alertly.

"So. A stranger with a friend's name. The birds flitter deep in the forest and the winds whisper to Simple John,—tales, many tales."

Speech dropped between them. After a while the strange figure arose and went silently away into the shadows. At a distance it halted.

"Stranger?" it said in a vaguely troubled voice, "stranger with a friend's name, but he makes the birds to flitter and the friendly wind to be uneasy on the trails. Lock the great gate, Master."

CHAPTER V

THE FACTOR'S GUEST

THE deep wall of the forest around the post was brave in its hardy hue of summer. The soft, light touch of spring had begun to press down upon the settlement with the caress of warmer passion. Doors stood open night and day and the older ones among the men spoke of the signs of a hot summer. Once before the hazy, coppery shimmer that hung at dawn over the Red Hills, far to the north beyond the Pot Hole country, had shown itself as early as this. That had been twenty years back and the Pestilence had ridden through the months that followed like a scourge from hell. Old Blanc Corlier, white of hair and beard as the snow of winter, shook his wise head ominously. Once only a breath of this ill prediction reached McConnel.

He came one night silently upon a group stretched in idleness upon the grass while the low talk went round. He stopped and heard. Then he strode in among them.

"France Thebeau," he said like the snap of a whip, "Blanc Corlier, Thomas Defrayne, — if I

hear of another such word I will arrest you and lock you up."

One day a band of the Blackfeet came into Fort Lu Cerne. There were fifty of them, lean, splendid warriors in breechclout and moccasins, with a single eagle feather braided into each scalplock. They came on a friendly visit, walking silently through the forest for the length of a three days' going, and they pitched their camp in the open space before the little church. Silent, savage looking braves they were, hedged about with impenetrable dignity. Head of the band, which was but a picked staff from a swarming legion over which he ruled with a red hot iron in the vague and almost unknown regions lying yet beyond the Red Hills, whose fastnesses were penetrated only by those solitary and venturesome voyageurs who had either nothing to lose or everything to gain, was Tilligamok, a chief of most imposing mien. McConnel spoke in his own tongue with every stray who came within his gates, so he received the visitors with a courtesy in keeping with their customs, ordered a beef to be killed out of the treasured herd of the settlement and prepared to entertain them.

For three days they stalked through the post in haughty silence, ate the Factor's provisions, and finally trailed away as mysteriously as they had

come, a memory of the wilderness. What they had accomplished in the way of establishing relations with Fort Lu Cerne no one could have guessed, not even McConnel, who had gravely sat each night of their stay smoking the pipe of peace with Tilligamok and holding the dignified and fragmentary conversations wherein each assured the other of the faith and brotherhood of their following.

These Indians had never come under the power of the Company, living apart from its largess, regarding it with a haughty indifference. The region over which they trailed their nomad camps was rich in game, its streams were full of fish, its furs, instead of being traded to the post for gewgaws and white man's fare, were made into primitive garments by the women, its flesh pounded into pemmican and stored in stiff cases made of wet skins dried swiftly over skeleton frames. Unlike the Ojibways, who were great friends of the fort, having fallen into many of the white man's ways and taking pride in their connection, the Blackfeet held themselves stiffly aloof.

McConnel had tried, by way of discreet word dropped into the ear of an occasional runner to be recounted in the tepees to the north, to draw into Fort Lu Cerne the rich streams of their trapping. But he had not succeeded. This visit of

Tilligamok was his first result, and it was uncertain in its portent. If he could win them it would mean gain for the Company,—the Company which was, to him, the Law, the Right and the undisputed and infallible God of the North Country. So he fell to brooding in the evenings in many sided speculation.

After the guests had gone, one day the Factor summoned his two clerks, Marc Baupre, and yellow headed, merry faced young Henri, son of old Blanc Corlier.

He opened the doors leading to the spacious storeroom, whose walls from floor to ceiling were faced with the year's provisions, cases of tea, coffee, and canned things, barrels of flour and sugar, salt and meal, and in whose disorder of arrangement showed the winter's inroads of disbursement.

He waved a hand around.

"Put it in order," he said shortly, "even the tiers of cases, straighten the boxes and barrels, see that the floors are cleaned and the counters cleared." Then he left them to the task, going himself to work alone in the great room, straightening and evening the gigantic stacks of furs, putting in nicer order the big desk at the railing, setting forth one other plate in the rack in the small room to the west, adding width to the solitary

bunk. Then he waited, in readiness, for the stranger, the wind of whose distant coming had breathed upon the hushed spirit of Simple John.

"Marie," that day said Jaqua, whose sharp eyes missed no nook or corner of the settlement, nor that which went on therein, "the Factor waits the coming of some important guest. He does of a surety, else why should Headquarters be set to rights from stem to gudgeon?" So presently the word went round that the Factor waited the arrival of some personage of importance, and none doubted that it had to do with the lost book of accounts and the imprisonment of Lois Le Moyne.

Four days went by and on the evening of the fifth there came to the great gate which stood open to all comers, one who travelled. He bestrode a stocky shagganappy, small and tough with sharp ears and a knowing little face, whose mate pattered eagerly behind, bearing for its part blankets and tins for the cooking of such scant fare as one may take who goes the long trails. The man himself was young and of a slightness which went not well with the importance of his bearing. His fair skin bore a stubble of light beard and his face showed unaccustomed touch with that vast silence and fear-giving loneliness of the great forest

which presses into nothingness the infinitesimal soul of man.

The Factor, who was ready and waiting, met him halfway down the wide beaten path that was a sort of street between the cabins leading from the big gate to Headquarters. He bowed with the dignity which came from his Scotch ancestors in the matter of receiving a guest, and which was never wasted on any less personage than his superior. Yet this man's face was strange. It had never been seen in Fort Lu Cerne before.

"You are McConnel, the Factor?" asked the newcomer, and his voice was of that quality which would have been impatient with a tithe more strain of tire.

"I am," said McConnel, "come this way."

Bareheaded in the pink and lavender light he turned and led the way to his own door.

"He is a man, that Factor," said Marcel Roque with reluctant admiration as she watched the small procession, "a man who would warp the path to purgatory to suit his ends. If he was but sharper of the perception and less hard of the head." Which was, as clever Marcel well knew, a stroke of truth.

The little horses were parcelled out to France Thebau and Palo Le Roc, each of whom possessed a team for the luxury of yearly summer

trips and the consequent accoutrements, such as halters and long ropes for the picketing out, and a tiny stable apiece.

Of the master the populace saw no more that night after he disappeared within the big doors.

"Tch! Jaqua," teased Marie Mercier, "he is a young man, and many a maid of the settlements has married a Great Man of the Company." For already the women had settled the traveller's estate as that of one in authority.

Jaqua, who was more often in the cabin of Marie than that of her father across the way, tossed her pretty head and her dark eyes flashed. Already she had seen certain possibilities, though not of marriage with the Factor's guest. It is an exciting game, that of playing one man and him of high estate, against another for the bringing back, or the awakening of interest, and who such past master of the art as she, pretty coquette of a hundred tilts. There might yet be a way of rousing Pierre Vernaise from his sickly pensiveness.

"It is of a precaution then, Jaqua," bantered Big Jean from the bed in the shadows, "that the window of the guardhouse be barred complete."

At which the girl, spoiled child that she was, flung out of the cabin and home.

"Now you have offend' the maid, who is a

pleasure in the house, Jean," reproved Marie. But Jean only chuckled weakly to himself.

The stranger rolled thankfully into McConnel's big bunk that night with no explanation of himself, and was dead asleep on the instant, the full lips fallen apart in the pale beard, the light eyes half shut in a weariness too deep for natural slumber. In the flickering glow of a candle, lighted out of courtesy, the Factor stood a moment and looked intently at him, before going to an hour's work on his accounts.

It was a strange face, and the mighty wilderness had laid its hand heavily upon it these many days. As McConnel stood so, shading the candle with his hand, the words of Simple John came back to him: "A stranger with a friend's name, but the little winds are uneasy on the trails. Lock the great gate, Master."

But though the man fell so swiftly into a sleep that took no heed of such things as hosts, or even of Factors of the H. B. C., it was no sign that he would not wake to a keen knowledge of them in the morning and McConnel would be prepared for whatever he might disclose.

Indeed the traveller was astir by daybreak, climbing out as McConnel set the breakfast on the pine table,—for the Factor of Fort Lu Cerne was of an exclusive habit of life, himself attend-

ing his simple wants, sending his two clerks to live with the families of certain trappers.

Now he bade his guest a grave good-morning, which the other met with a flashing smile.

"Pretty near done, wasn't I?" he vouchsafed cheerfully, under the influence of the enticing aroma of coffee which makes the world akin.

The Factor assured him that it was so.

They partook of the simple fare and ever McConnell was listening for the word that should reveal his guest, but it was not forthcoming until they had lighted pipes and were strolling forward into the big room.

At the gate into the sanctuary the Factor paused for an uncertain moment, then flung it open and bade the other enter.

"You will be from Henriette?" he asked.

"From Henriette," said the stranger with a faint trace of superiority in his voice, "and I may as well tell you that I am sent of my uncle, Governor Stanton, with a view to learning the intimate life of the post, your manner of dealing with the Indians, of keeping accounts and all things else. After a short rest here I shall press on to the small new post on the Windage Lake, after which hurried trip I shall return to remain until the spring. As guaranty, M'sieu, I bring a letter from Governor Stanton."

And he opened the breast of his coat and handed McConnel a folded paper whereon was the somewhat familiar script of that mighty man of Henriette, Governor Stanton, whose dealings had ever borne the kindly hue of friendship.

It set forth to the Factor the simple fact that the stranger, Richard Sylvester, was to be made free of Fort Lu Cerne, its doings, its accounts and its prospects, as in the following year he was to be made a factor of the Company and it was fitting he should understand the Company's methods.

That was all, and as McConnel read it his sharp eyes took on a slight smile. Should understand the Company's methods! Within a matter of months when he had given the slow years to that accomplishment!

He thought a moment with the paper spread in his hands.

So! Thus had Simple John foreseen the stranger with a friend's name! It was here on the paper and something in McConnel's heart echoed the cry, "Lock the great gate, Master!"

However, this was orders from Headquarters and he would obey them, however much he might wonder and disapprove.

The Factor was a man of few words and no byways. He led the way into the big room, opened the gate in the solid railing and ushered

his guest into his sacred place. He laid before him his carefully compiled memory copy of the lost book.

"The book of accounts," he said straightly, "is stolen. This is as near as I could come to its contents from memory. It has proven satisfactory to all those with whom it has to do except Blanc Corlier, who insists on three red fox skins which I cannot place, and Jean Mercier who,——"

But the new man had looked up from the open page and the rose of the early light showed his face. It was blank with amazement which was fast changing.

"Stolen!" he gasped, "the year's accounts! And you offer the Company—*as much as you can remember!*"

New authority, outraged, glimmered to the surface in his countenance. He pulled himself up impressively.

"This is a grave matter, Mr. McConnel," he said, "a grave matter. May I ask the particulars?"

For one moment the sharp eyes of the Factor narrowed as he regarded the other. Then he pulled up the one other chair and deliberately sat down. He had taken his measure of Sylvestor.

"The book was stolen, here, in this room, taken from this desk where it has been kept for years,—

all of the years of the life of Fort Lu Cerne. One person there is who was caught in the room the evening after it disappeared, who had no business here and whom I hold as the thief. That person has been in the guardhouse since the theft, awaiting such time as the book shall be returned. It has not been returned. Those are the particulars." McConnel shut his mouth on the last word. Further, he did not offer.

Sylvestor nodded a stiff approval.

"That much is good, Mr. McConnel," he said, "I approve you there. To have caught the thief is well. To have gotten back the accounts would have been better."

For four hours they two sat at the big desk, delving into the long lines of items, going over all together, yet between them rode a subtle thing that was neither trust nor liking nor that confidence which was a cast iron rule of the H. B. Co. between it and its Factors.

Then they put away the books and rose, stretching the cramp of sitting from their limbs.

"Now," said McConnel, "we will go to the guardhouse."

CHAPTER VI

A LINE IN SHALLOW WATER

THE sap of the golden spring was running in the veins of all live things, the whispering trees in the forest, lifting their giant heads to the beguiling sky, the birds twittering in its depths, the flowers, no longer timid with fear of the swooping winds that came down from the snow yet lingering to the far north, the youths and the maidens whose songs rose on the air from all over Fort Lu Cerne, and stronger than in any of these, tugging with a wilder strain, more calling and insistent it surged upward to the lawless heart of Lois Le Moyne, pacing her prison with her face to the farther wall. Never in all her untrammelled life had the voice of the wilderness so pulled at her yearning soul.

The dim trails in the dusky shadows of the big woods spoke to her, the silence of far sweet places hung on her ear, the whisper of live things hidden in the depths twitched her fingers, for Lois was deft with the trigger as with the beads and smoked buckskin. To-day the smouldering fire, so covered

in and banked by pride and unbending coolness, was eating into the heart that sheltered it. Her eyes were dry and bright and the hands shut at her sides were hot. Once she glanced at the ivory Christ on the black iron crucifix and the spirit that was in her refused the softening service of the "Jesu mia." She paced, with her face turned from the window, that no chance observer might behold its weakness.

So, a voice fell on her ear, a voice whose tones, never once heard since the last furious command of that night of her imprisonment, halted the girl in an instant hush of body and mind and sent the blood out of her face, while through her sudden pallour flickered faintly at the base of the delicate nostrils the pinched white line of rage.

"It is but circumstantial evidence," the Factor's voice was saying, "the book has not been found, but none other holds so great a taint of guilt."

There was the slipping of feet on the sod outside, which halted at the window and Lois could feel the breathing presence of someone at the bars. Then,—

"Good Lord! A woman!" said a strange voice.

There passed a curious moment. McConnel vouchsafed no comment on the ejaculation. Richard Sylvester stood, staring. The girl in the

prison did not move. Presently the stranger spoke again, incredulously.

“And this young woman was caught in the private office?”

“Aye,—at dusk. Lois Le Moyne, come here.”

McConnel's voice shot from the window, stern, unbending as stone, with the same quality of harshness as on the night she had defied him.

He waited. Not one muscle moved in the straight young back presented to the window. A long braid of blue-black hair lay along it, reaching to the knees. The lifted head was motionless. It was as if she had not heard. The Factor turned from the window grimly, his mouth set hard, and taking out his keys, opened the heavy door and entered. Sylvester followed wonderingly. Without ado McConnel strode to Lois, grasped her shoulder and turned her round. The new man smothered a gasp at the living mask of hatred that was the girl's face. Instantly that quality within him which had sent him across seas for adventure, comprehended that here was an unending puzzle, erringly being played out between two forces equally strong and relentless. He turned the trick with a deft hand.

“Leave her to me, McConnel,” he said with a shadow of authority, “I will talk with her alone.”

The Scotchman, accepting it, dropped his hand, walked to the door and out, closing it with the key left in. Left together, the two faced each other. The man, fresh from the gaities of civilisation, stood silent, reading the unmatched beauty of the girl's disdainful face. Lois, sullen, dark browed, haughty Lois, keen with the sharpness of those who keep apart and look on from afar, used the moment for the reading of a page also, a page of light eyes and lighter hair and beard, of full lips that told a tale, of a weak chin and a dominant head, and a thrill of feeling ran tingling to her finger tips. A sigh, that was relief from the grip of wild passion, loosened her breath.

"Ma'amselle," said Richard Sylvestor at last, and his voice betrayed his pleasure, "Ma'amselle, let us talk it out,—you and I, since I am one to understand you. The Factor, while finely zealous for the Company, is not one to handle a delicate point. I fear he has blundered here, in his stubborn haste."

He smiled with a languorous lowering of the yellow fringed lids, and the quick wits of the girl formed on that instant a far reaching plan.

She half turned from him, and for the first time in her life the red line of her lips drooped gently at the corners.

"There is no need, M'sieu," she said. "I, who

am innocent, will not demean myself to plead my cause."

And that was the last word Sylvester got from her, though he talked with a silver tongue for many minutes. Lois did no more than shake her head and busy herself putting the faultless interior to more minute rights.

So after a while the stranger left the guard-house, completely mystified by one slip of a girl in whose innocence he was already beginning to believe. Which was the first step in Lois' plan.

Every eye in the post had seen the going,—and the coming,—of the Factor and his guest. Tongues wagged in every cabin, withal discreetly.

Saucy Jaqua returning from the well at the big gate smiled to herself, seeing yet another possibility. Old Jaques trembled in Marcel's dooryard, for the hand of authority loomed large and menacing to the soul of him, made timorous by age. But Marcel herself marched over to talk to Lois.

"What is toward, Lois?" she demanded. "Has he dared, that Factor, another outrage of accusation?" But Lois was calm and ignorant.

"Nothing," she said, "no, Marcel. The new man but came for a look at the prisoner."

Marcel's dark eyes flashed. Then they clouded with ready tears.

"Oh, it is the outrage! Six weeks of the spring! Why will you not work at the beading, child? It would be an easing of the mind of its loneliness. I know where are the sewing strings, the boxes of beads in your house, and the uncut skin still hangs at the hearth. I would gladly fetch,——" But the girl flamed out at her good friend with a tongue of fire that ever lay in her strange nature.

"Never speak to me of the beading again, Marcel Roque," she cried fiercely, "never again do I touch a bead,—I have vowed to the Virgin."

A deep red flush stained her lowering face and the black brows drew together. For a moment she scowled over Marcel's shoulder. Then she put an impulsive hand through the bars, laying it with unwonted tenderness on her arm.

"Forgive me, Marcel," she said, "I would wrong my best friend."

From that first visit of Sylvestor to the guard-house grew many others. The days of a week went by with their soft airs, their warm suns, their general feeling of buoyancy, and on every one of them he stood at the barred window talking with Lois, who came readily to the sill and the look of pleasure in his light eyes deepened and grew.

And it was another Lois Le Moyne who leaned toward the outside world, a Lois of gentle eyes and lips and drooping dark head that had never

drooped before, a Lois who smiled with a turn of the red mouth learned from an alien thing in her own heart, a Lois so appealing in the pensive endurance of her unrivalled beauty that no man who walked the earth in the full strength of its power could have kept his head. And it was never calculated by Destiny or Lois herself that Richard Sylvestor should keep his.

At the end of four days he was saying through the bars,—

“I have not asked the reason of your going to Headquarters, Ma’amselle Le Moyne. A thousand missions might have taken you. McConnel is a blunderer in his blind zeal for the Company, which of course is to be commended, and I am the one to right his mistakes.”

By the week’s end he accosted the Factor. It was evening of a day when McConnel sat long over his accounts and was even then bent above the big desk with a tallow candle burning beside his stooping face.

The younger man came in and stood silently leaning against the pine railing. He pulled at the light beard, pointing shortly over the narrow chin, and regarded the heavy, stooping figure. Presently he broke the silence.

“McConnel, I believe you have made a mistake.”

At the words the Factor looked up.

"So?" he said.

"It is only circumstantial evidence which keeps Miss Le Moyne a prisoner, you know, and the book is no nearer found. I don't feel justified in holding her any longer. What do you think?"

For a moment there was absolute silence. Without came the little pleasant sounds of the post, a baby crying in a distant cabin and a wild boating song of the hardy voyageurs being crooned by the mother, a maiden laughing on the steps of the little church, a fiddle creaking by the southern wall. For the small space of a moment McConnel did not speak. Then he said in a voice as cold as his blue eyes:

"I have done as I thought best for the good of the Company. I command in Fort Lu Cerne," and fell to work again at his task. In his scale of values the Company could do no wrong.

"But see, McConnel," went on the other, "it does no good to keep her there—the book is not found,—and I'm sure the Governor would not advise the holding of a woman. If you will let me liberate her, I will take the responsibility,—my uncle relies upon my word."

There was a covert meaning in his words, a hidden something that vexed McConnel, but after a long interval of silence he said, coldly,—*"As you please, M'sieu."*

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST RESULT

EARLY on the following morning Sylvestor went to the guardhouse. His face was alight with a fluttering excitement. He carried the Factor's bunch of keys.

Lois, already astir within, saw and trembled. At the window he stopped.

"For the last time, Ma'amselle," he cried gaily, holding them up to sight, "three steps to the door yonder and you are free. The morning is golden and I am full of happiness that it sees your release."

Lois looked widely into his smiling eyes, fluttering a hand lightly at her throat, her lips a bit apart in amazed wonder.

"Release?" she said with a little gasp. "Oh, M'sieu!"

Then she straightened with the indefinable, haughty grace which had first delighted this loiterer in the ways of pleasure.

"If you please, M'sieu,—Jaques pere,—the old man who sits on the stool each day. I would have him behold my justification."

"In one moment, Ma'amselle,— Such a woman! Such a child!" he finished to himself, already on the way to Marcel's cabin.

Old Jaques, routed out by Marcel, herself buoyant with hope since the stranger had influenced the Factor, trembled and hurried pitiably.

"Don't worry," assured Sylvestor, bursting with good feeling and presage of the approbation he would win all over the post by this morning's work, "to-day sees your daughter, sir, set free. She would have you there to witness it. Come on."

In the time that it took Jaques' unsteady legs to traverse the short distance to the guardhouse and Sylvestor to unlock the door, the whole of Fort Lu Cerne, standing on every sill, beheld a sight worth seeing.

Down the wide road toward the cabin deserted so long ago, her head no higher than on the darkest day of her punishment, one arm tightly around the stooping, slim shoulders of the old trapper, the rising sun on her pale face, Lois Le Moyne went home. And beside her walked Richard Sylvestor.

Marcel, her tender eyes suffused with tears, waited on the cabin's steps, the door opened, a fire already beginning to leap on the hearth, and a kettle, carried from her own, commencing its inter-

rupted song. Around her skirt peered the timid child, hiding its misshapen shoulders in an old sensitiveness.

Lois made no sign for the eager eyes, but her own sought Marcel's with a light that the older woman understood with a thrill of joy. The three entered, and Marcel, following, closed the door to the outer world.

It talked in lowered tones, watching until presently Sylvestor and Marcel came out, walking the length between the cabins, and the stranger shook Marcel's hand at her door, bowing gallantly over it in the face of the populace.

"Strange ways for a man of the Company," muttered Blanc Corlier.

"A very fine gentleman, think you not, Pierre?" asked little Jaqua innocently of Pierre Vernaise, who flung disdainfully away without an answer, having seen all.

So Lois Le Moyne took up her life just where she had dropped it, spending on her father more tenderly than ever that care which was lengthening his worn-out years. Marcel brought from the guardhouse her few possessions and by nightfall the cabin had its old look and feeling of life. The black crucifix hung once more above the box which, draped in faded papers, did duty as a shrine, the two narrow, built-in beds bulged again with their

pilfered covers, the trinkets stood bravely on the split log above the hearth and on the floor the silver fox that was the gift of Pierre shone in the dancing light. Lois was at home in her sanctuary. One thing was changed.

The beautiful white deerhide, hung to the blaze to darken for the beading on the last eventful day, was gone. With her first lone moment the girl, flaming red with a scarlet blush, had pounced upon it and thrown it into the fire. So she put on the supper, brought from Marcel's house, with hands that tingled with the joy of familiarity.

In the corner settle Old Jaques whimpered in a childish delight that caused her heart to ache.

Many a speculation went around as to how the girl would appear, whether or not the strangeness of her nature would be altered, or if she would be the same. They were not kept in doubt. The next morning Lois went to the well for water, as was her habit, with a quiet word for those she met and for Pierre, whom she faced there, a look of such a deep, warm friendliness that the sullenness caused by Sylvestor's notice of the girl melted under its glow. He took her pail from her.

"If I may, Ma'amselle?" he asked diffidently, and Lois smiled, not as she had smiled at Sylvestor with drooping lips and eyes, but proudly, frankly.

“Next to Marcel, M’sieu,” she said, “you are my friend.”

Which word spoken by so upright a person as Lois filled the merry heart of the youth with its truth. But not for long was he destined to keep his ease of mind.

The stranger was to have been gone by the week’s end, pushing on to the tiny new post just beginning its life beyond in the wilderness to the west, a handful of men alone in a shining new stockade, one more finger of the great hand of the Company. What his mission was there he did not say, and none asked. The day of his going came and passed and still he lingered at Fort Lu Cerne. Each day saw him at the cabin of Old Jaques, each evening saw him sitting tilted back against its face, his light eyes on Lois’ black crowned head, his slow voice drawling in ceaseless talk. To Pierre it was as slow fire. Moody, silent, he gloomed alone on the steps of the little church, wishing that Father Tenau were due from the settlements to the south that he might ease his heart by the confession, for Pierre was one of those for whom the soul of the good father was burdened always, what with his defections and his repentances that lasted only through the absolving that he might have a wider field for the former again.

So to him came, of an accident assuredly, pretty Jaqua, passing from a cabin at the northwest corner of the post down to that of her father in the more populous portion. The evening dusk lay daintily on her red cheeks, her dark hair and her darker eyes. Next to Lois Le Moyne she was of a rare beauty with her piquant ways, her dimples and her short upper lip. Now the love that was in her heart for this reckless youth made her little face of a yearning tenderness. She stopped and accosted him.

"Is it the religion, M'sieu Vernaise, that cause' you to sit alone, so, in the dark? Vraiment! You have change'."

The resentment in the soul of Pierre had made it sore these five days. He yearned for the easing of companionship. So he held out an impulsive hand.

"If it is, I know of one who can administer the consolation," he said in his old manner. "Sit here beside me, little one, for a space. Now talk. Your merry tongue is at times a blessing."

Jaqua's heart leaped as she slipped her small fingers within his clasp and swung down on the log step, lightly, like a young child.

"Of a truth," she said saucily, "else why was woman's tongue given her, Pierre Vernaise? It has two ends, though. Never be sure of a

woman's tongue." She laughed, a pretty sound, and Pierre doubled up and covered with his own the very little hand, holding it so a moment, then spreading out the fingers and making it look like an open water lily on the breast of a pond. The smouldering ache within him found soothing in the touch of a woman's hand, even though it was that of another than she whose stately image gave him no peace. He smiled in momentary content.

"So?" he said. "Then why warn me when you are a woman? I might want to be sure of yours some time."

It was inherent in his blood, the making of tender speeches, and meant no more than the passing of comment on the weather, a pleasant and usual form of conversation, and Jaqua knew it, yet now the words set her head to whirling and the heart in her breast to beating to suffocation, so that her usual cunning deserted her and she made a foolish cast.

"Why? Because I have seen you turned to a patient squaw these many days by the soft words of a woman who sits but now talking with that same tongue to another—he of the yellow beard and strange eyes. Be sure of both ends, Pierre Vernaise, before you trust too deeply."

It was a swift thrust, unguarded by any tact,

and the girl could have bitten her own member of trouble for it the next second, but it was too late.

Pierre said not a word but laid gently upon her lap the little hand he had been holding. He sat still a moment staring into the dusk once more gloomily, then he rose.

"It gets late, Jaqua," he said. "I see the candle already in your mother's window," and strode away. The little maid arose and went on her interrupted way, but the moment's tarrying had lost her a golden chance and filled her eyes with dismal tears. Into the heart of the man it had put a two-edged dagger. The growing hatred he had felt for Sylvestor these many days hardened into a sudden desire for murder and his slender fingers slipped to the hilt of the knife in his striped sash. It was due to that destiny which rules the lives of men that at that evil moment he should meet full in the face, Sylvestor coming from Le Moyne's cabin. The cavalier was humming a careless song of the settlement as he swung forward and the lilting notes fired the hot French blood Pierre had got from his father, while the stealthy strain of his Indian mother slowed his step unconsciously for a spring. The other did not slacken pace nor cease his gay air, but came lightly on in the dusk. At the very turn of the

second when Pierre's arm strained for a thrust of vengeance he spoke, sharply, like a shot in dark silence.

“Put up that knife, Vernaise,—I am master here,” and was gone in the shadows, humming his insolent tune.

CHAPTER VIII

A MAID WITH A MAN

THREE days later Sylvestor stood at dawn at the door of Le Moyne's cabin. The little horses stood ready and waiting, the outfit strapped on the one, the other bearing its saddle. The master's head was bared and he held a hand of Lois in both his own. The new light showed his narrow face glowing with ill-repressed passion.

"Lois,—Lois," he said tensely, "when I come back,—tell me you will answer when I come back," and the girl smiled down at him with that drooping of eyes and lips learned in the guard-house.

"When you come back, M'sieu,—yes, of a surety, when you come back."

So Sylvestor climbed into his saddle, settled his gear, the rifle at his shoulder slung by a strap, the knife in his belt, and turned his horses toward that wilderness of forest and stream and uncounted miles that lay between him and his desire until he should return to Fort Lu Cerne again.

At the gate he looked back. The red sun lay

on the dusky head of this girl he had found in the far places, touching the wondrous face into the weird beauty of a priestess of some ancient creed, outlining against the dull logs of the cabin the straight young form with its mystic hauteur of poise and bearing, and his heart strained in his breast with a wild surge of passion. He rode into the forest and the giant trees opened their arms and accepted him, hiding him from the light of day, inviting him to the solitudes of their untracked ways, the communion of their solemn souls, but to Sylvester it was a hateful going and served only to cool the red blood in his flushed face. He disliked the wilderness with its myriad tiny voices and its air of waiting. The monotonous days of twisting through dim aisles, of coaxing the little horses over fallen logs, of forcing a way through undergrowth where the old trails were overgrown, of stopping to build a fire and cook his solitary meal, of pushing on again until the early dusk of coming night darkened the green dimness of the day, were so many periods of a torture that he vowed more than once he would not bear again. Even the prestige he was to have in the following year, when he had learned sufficient to satisfy that old martinet, his uncle, seemed at times but light price for this trying of the very soul of a man.

Still this trip was vastly better than that which had brought him to Fort Lu Cerne. Then he had but the will-o'-the-wisp of ambition to dance before him through the endless days, a winsome enough lure when one is sated with the gaieties of so frivolous a world as that of Henriette, but now he saw down every leafy aisle and in every shadow of his flickering fire the unreadable face of Lois Le Moyne, maddening in its cold aloofness, its sudden melting of eyes and lips that might portend anything or nothing and which served to set his blood on fire. Through the days of his travel Sylvestor brooded constantly. What was the girl, where had she gotten the dignity that hedged her about, even in her ignominy, as with a garment, the cold reserve and quiet of an Indian, the hauteur which hid,—what? Was it but the coquetry of a woman, the love of conquest such as he had met many times before, or was it something deeper, greater, more wonderful than anything he had ever glimpsed in his somewhat varied life, the priceless thing that seemed to glitter unconsciously in her dusky eyes, to reveal itself in that maddening droop of her red lips? He did not know and no sooner did he convince himself of one thing than the other thrust itself before him and did his judgment damage. So Sylvestor rode his weary way through the big woods with

dreaming eyes and thoughts of his return to Fort Lu Cerne, which he promised himself would be as speedy as might be, with counting the time he must allow to the tiny new post struggling for existence on the frontier. It was an uneventful trip. Only once did he see an Indian. Then it was to fall in with a small party of the friendly Crees travelling westward for a visit in the hunting season with a tribe of kin. He pitched his camp at their fires and smoked the peacepipe in friendliness, travelling with them for three days, at which time his trail turned north and he left them with regret. So at last he reached his journey's end and was again taken in from the grip of the lone places.

At Fort Lu Cerne the golden spring was rounding into the more splendid effulgence of summer. On Lois' doorstep Marcel sat holding the child and talking, her comely dark head shining in the sun. There was an anxious pucker on her forehead and her face betrayed some inner thought that was not pleasant. Lois, sitting idle against the rude jamb, scanned the countenance of her friend with sidewise glance. Presently she said abruptly:

“What is it, Marcel?”

Marcel looked up with a smile of something like relief.

"May I say it?" she queried.

The girl smiled slowly, half closing her eyes and regarding the older woman with a look that made her uneasy, but which, had she been able to read with even more than her native quickness, was the highest compliment she had ever received in her life.

"Anything, Marcel," she said.

"Then it is this,—when the winter's debt is gone, how will you live, *ma chère*? I am of a worry for your sake, since you have refuse' the work of the beading." Lois looked away while the strange flush that ever accompanied word of this peculiar craft of her deft hands flamed to her forehead.

"I have arranged with Henri Corlier already for a set of traps and his run on the south branch of Wau-gash stream," she said quietly, "and with first snow I take Jaques pere to the cabin there, built by old Judson for his Ojibway girl, who died the first year. I doubt not, Marcel, that I will carry as good an account at Headquarters as ever I did with the beading."

"Voila! Lois, you are build' of the right material. It is the good plan of a surety," and Marcel gathered the little Solierre with his pathetic wee face and questioning blue eyes into her arms preparatory to returning to her house. "But yet

it is a hard life, the trapping, fit more for a hardy man."

Lois sat on the steps and watched Marcel carry the child away up the short distance of the main way, his soft curls lifting with the mother's steps and his little face like a picture turned back across her shoulder, and over her impassive features went a wimple of unwonted tenderness. She did not wave a hand to the little fellow to please his baby heart, she could not. She was not that kind, this Lois Le Moyne with her cold face, her frowning eyes and her seemingly half-brutal nature. Yet she would do some day for Marcel and the boy more than wave a hand.

The two passed in at their own threshold and her softened gaze wandered idly over all the buildings of the post lying happily in the warm sun, the doorways open to the soft airs, the children playing on the sills. As her eyes swept the western wall they lighted for a moment on the wooden cross, so bravely holding up to all beholders, here in this chance spot reclaimed from the wild, its promise of eternal hope, its dumb appeal to that inner man which is the best of one, and for the brief space of that moment the unusual melting of her nature caused her eyes to linger there with thoughts that had been strangers to her mind for many days.

In the next the shadow dropped like a curtain across her face and the fire of her eyes, forever smouldering, flamed up again, turning her beauty into a sullen mask. Out from the eastern door of the Headquarters the Factor was coming down the open way toward the gate. He must pass directly by her door and not twenty feet away. At the same moment Old Jaques, himself again since the return of Lois, came hobbling happily from some conference of aged cronies by the stockade wall, giving the girl a chance for retreat into the cabin. Instead, she pushed toward him the low chair that was his comfort, and sat still, waiting quietly without a quiver until McConnel had strode heavily by. Then a long breath choked up through the tumult that stifled her breast and her hands unclenched where they lay in her lap. 'Twas plain that whatever of hatred for this man had come to life within her on that first dreadful night in the guardhouse was not only still living, but grown to full size.

As for the Factor himself, the stern face of him was sterner than ever and his native taciturnity clung closer than before since the advent of Sylvester with his seeming of authority and his feelings that might be swayed for other sake than that of the Company. To McConnel there was nothing above the Company. In its service he had

spent the years of his young manhood, delving for its good with undivided heart, loyal, uncomplaining, undertaking any hardship with that tenacity of purpose which was his birthright. His father before him had lived on the frontier, a merry Scotch-Irishman, serving the Company as a very valuable scout, risking his life unnumbered times to keep in touch with conditions so far in the wilderness that his was the first white foot to press the virgin earth, and into the very blood of his son had been born the unswerving service of it. So now the insolent baiting of that Company, which was to McConnel something after the manner of a god since he had risen in its slow favor to the place of Factor, was as gall and wormwood to him. The only pride of his lonely life was his attainment to this post of honour, won by hard service and slow patience. It possessed him like a mania as the lure of gold possesses men, as a woman's love fills the lives of some of them and as ambition of some sort dominates all.

So he went about among his people, silent, self-centred, more unapproachable than ever, a weight as of vague failure on his conscience and the ceaseless mill of his thoughts grinding over the lost book of accounts. It was no matter that the people drew from him, avoiding him in a common dislike, still smarting under the harshness of his

treatment concerning the suspected Lois and the misguided Jean Mercier, that the sleeping blame of him and his ways had grown with the spring. None approached him except for the necessary drawing of supplies and the signing of names, even Palo Le Roc, who weighed all things so carefully and feared no man, meeting him with reluctance. A sad state of affairs to exist between a Factor and his people. As he passed the cabin of Old Jaques this day he did not glance toward it, neither did his mind conceive its presence, nor that of the girl who sat upon its steps defying the tumult of her passion that she might prove to those who might care to see that no fibre of her body cringed with fear of the man who had so mercilessly punished her.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT BEFORE HEADQUARTERS

PIERRE VERNAISE kept clear of Lois. Within him was raging such a wild sea of despair as lashed him into unwonted solitude and the company of his own thoughts. All through the week that followed Sylvestor's departure he gloomed by himself, going into the forest at daybreak to come back at dusk laden with toll of the wild things. The days drifted softly by until another week and more had passed, and then one evening Sylvestor came back. His little horses were jaded with too hurried a trip and his own face, turned eagerly toward Lois Le Moyne's cabin, betrayed his haste. Thereupon Pierre said a great oath and packed that night a shoulder kit. By light he was gone upon the far trails. If the thing was to be, he would not witness it. And why should it not be? Lois was a maid and Sylvestor was a man whom the gods of the Company had seemingly marked for favour, since they bade McConnel defer to him. Therefore it was natural and not to be wondered at. Yet Pierre wondered. And meantime many

another in Fort Lu Cerne wondered. Sylvestor took up his unwelcome habitat in the Factor's room and overstayed all precedent. He bit deep into the silent heart of McConnel, who regarded him as a traitor to the Company, one unaccountably risen to high places who was not worthy. But Sylvestor paid no heed to the attitude of the Factor nor aught save the face of the woman for whose sake he was wakening in every fibre of his light soul.

He came to her as soon as might be on the morning after his return, groomed, neat in his garments of civilisation, glowing with eagerness, half confident,—for what maid of the posts would refuse to be his wife? Yet Lois received him with her calm quiet, albeit the dark eyes drooped as he came in and caught her unresisting hands.

"Is it my answer now, Lois?" he cried, flushing like a girl. "Am I to know your strange heart now?"

They were alone, Old Jaques having tottered away on some quest of the aged cronies.

The girl raised to his eager face eyes clouded with a vague trouble.

"M'sieu," she faltered, "M'sieu—— It is that I cannot—I who have been disgrace' before the post. It is of a presumption that Lois Le Moyne, late of the guardhouse, should raise her

eyes to one so far above her. It is,—it is,—the shadow, M'sieu,—the shadow of a disgrace which must be removed. The book of accounts must be found so that the Factor will absolve me,—and that, M'sieu, is of the impossibility."

She drooped her high head in the best similitude of a mighty humiliation.

The man stood silent in consternation.

Presently he lifted her face with a trembling hand.

"You mean?" he said tensely.

Then the sombre eyes of Lois Le Moyne did not lift themselves, for in their depths was not wistful sadness such as sat boldly upon their kindred features, but a hot fire that burned with eagerness.

"That only the Factor himself can absolve me, M'sieu, and that he will not," she said gently.

"Mercy of Heaven!" cried Sylvestor, "you mean that McConnel knows where the book is? And that he punishes you purposely?" He shook her slightly in his excitement.

"But why, Lois? Why?" he demanded, "why should he do so monstrous a thing?" Then Lois looked up and the dark wells were clear as a child's.

"You, M'sieu, are not the only man who has

spoken of love to me," she lied, "though all have not received your welcome."

So was laid another step in that far-reaching plan.

Sylvestor dropped her hands and the red blood of his manhood fled into his cheeks.

"My lady," he said with a simple dignity, "I'll make this Factor wipe out in dust and blood the shadow of your punishment before Fort Lu Cerne, or I will kill him."

Bowing like a courtier he kissed her hand and, turning, went out of the cabin.

And Lois Le Moyne, the lawless, watched him go and a premonitory peace settled upon her spirit.

All of Fort Lu Cerne knew of the encounter that ensued, and indeed the news of it was noised abroad over the whole of the north country. Wherever the trappers gathered about a campfire, or the Cree runners slipped into the scattered habitations of the Ragged Lands, it had its tellings in many tongues and with many variations. In a land where men fight, perforce, to the death, with never a word and no sound but the slipping of a moosehide shoe and the whicker of knives, it had a place in the meagre speech by reason of its ferocity.

Sylvestor had come upon McConnel just at

the door of the big room at Headquarters as he stepped out to cross the bare space before the building. Marc Baupre, idling by in the golden morning, saw and heard the beginning. The younger man's face was purple beneath its fair skin and his light eyes were overlaid with the darkness of excitement. He stopped the Factor imperiously.

"McConnel," he said swiftly, without the careful thought of a just and balanced man, "McConnel, this farce has been played out. You have lorded it a little too long in Fort Lu Cerne. More than once the Hudson's Bay Company has proved the shield of a Factor but never, by Heaven, to the ruin of a maid. Nor shall it do so longer here. I want that book of accounts which you have so carefully lost."

He was panting with anger and foretasted authority as he spoke and he looked McConnel straight between the eyes.

It took the slow wits of the Scotchman the better part of a minute to gather in the portent of his words. He stood there, heavy, stolid, slow, planted squarely on his two feet, his compact body easily loose with the stoppage of his stride, yet giving no impression of laxness.

"Eh?" he said, and presently, "So?"

"So. And at once," said Sylvestor.

McConnel's heavy fists hanging at his sides shut slowly.

"Ye mean, Mr. Sylvestor, that I have the book?" he asked.

"Just what I mean. And as one close to the Governors of the Hudson's Bay Company, I want it."

There was a moment, so said Marc Baupre afterward in the telling of it, when the muscles in McConnel's great shoulders contracted into bunches and lifted in hillocks the close fitting flannel shirt, and his whole body seemed on the point of swinging forward to the certain destruction of the slight man before him, when the features of his face settled into the deep lines that stood for inner fire. Marc held his breath that moment expecting murder, but the next, the Factor straightened up and the hands at his sides unclenched and he turned away toward the open door behind him.

It was then that Sylvestor lost his last remnant of control. He flung himself forward and caught the other by the shoulder and the sharp staccatto stroke of his sweeping arm threw McConnel around like a wheat straw, and he was a big man. Marc Baupre said it was an amazing thing, that whirling stroke, for Sylvestor was slight. His pale eyes were on fire and the anger of a man who

fight for a woman dignified his form. He faced the Factor in a taut hush.

"McConnel," he said huskily, "it's man to man. I'm going to kill you if I can."

Within ten breaths after they had closed a solid circle leaned, hushed and open mouthed, around the clear space before the Factor's house.

That was a fight to tell about indeed around the fireplaces in the long winters, a fight wherein two men, unequally matched except in unbridled anger, in soreness and mutual dislike, strained and struggled for the supremacy. The Scotchman, in that first moment of accusation, had known he must control himself, therefore he had turned away. But Sylvester had brought it on himself. So that, with the first stroke of his doubled fist, sharp and telling, he had loosed the blood in McConnel, never far from the thin ice of a hard won and hard held conventionality, and the indomitable blind fighting fury of generations of unknown ancestors in the Scottish hills was let loose within the square frame of the Factor.

He reached out with one great hand that caught Sylvester by the throat.

They said that he stood a minute as if considering what he should do with him, his face growing whiter and whiter as the fury rose in him, and all the misunderstanding of the past months broke

their bounds of toleration, but before he could form his slow wits to a decision, Sylvestor made a swift, slipping motion and twisted free. The slender fellow did not wait for that mighty grip again, but flew at McConnel like a tiger fighting for its life. The two men clenched together and for a space there was neither fighting nor sound of it, simply a silence as they strained and breathed, taking out their satisfaction in simple gripping anger. Then the man from the civilised ways tore apart and his face had changed. He put up a guard, taut, eager, watchful, his legs, bending slightly at the knees, a bit apart, firmly planted and ready, his fists small, but hard as iron as the whitened muscles showed, beginning their wonderful play that was to make this fight a thing to be told through many seasons. The Factor knew naught of how men fight in dusted rings with hundreds of spectators in top hats and furs, of that science and perfected knowledge that can make of a small man a thing to fear. He had lived through his life in the savage places where men and beasts fight with the strength the good God has given them and look to it alone for victory. Therefore he charged headlong with all his giant strength at Sylvestor standing there, to be received by an empty space as the other stepped lightly aside and a blow like the stroke of an iron

sledge caught him in the temple. He wavered a moment and caught himself to charge again, and again Sylvestor landed a blow upon him that staggered him in the immensity of its weight. Again and again McConnel flung himself at his adversary, fighting blindly with that rage which takes heed of naught but the unmeasured desire to get at and twist into shreds the thing that opposes, and again and again Sylvestor met him with those terrible staccatto blows, blows that landed and came again like lightning, punishing the great frame of the man as with a leaded flail.

The skin of the Factor's right brow was cut loose and hanging over his eye and a wheal like a whip handle stood out on his jaw. The smell of warm blood smoked up in the soft morning air and one of Palo Le Roc's dogs, crouching on the outskirts of the gazing circle, lifted its muzzle and howled. In the doorways, ever open to the doings of this little world, the women stood on tip-toe, hushed into an unwonted silence by the magnitude of the struggle. Little Jaqua, eager and impudent, peeped and peeked on the very edge of the circle of men. McConnel, blinded alike by blood and rage, struck and lunged and groped, vainly struggling for a grasp of the man who eluded him as lightly as the wind, plunging toward him only to be met by a blow that blinded him yet

more, a pitiful object at last in his mighty and un-availing strength. Sylvestor had not a scratch, neither was he gasping for breath as was the Factor. He stepped here and there, flailing his foe with terrific and unmerciful blows, light, limber, active, his flushed face cruel in its hardness, the cold light of murder in his eyes.

There was no word spoken, by those who fought or those who watched. It was beyond the time for speech. McConnel was staggering. Over and over Sylvestor struck him in the face, mashing the flesh outward like a pulped apple, and with each blow this alien was saying to himself with infinite pleasure, "Take that, you befouler of women, you avenger of balked love on a helpless girl!"

Wilder and more at random became the big man's rushes, he struck at the air, being blind, he wavered wherever he heard the slip of the other's leather shoes, and made heavy attempts to get at him. He was breathing hoarsely and more than one in the hushed circle whispered an ejaculation of amaze, for it began to show that Sylvestor meant it to the death. Picking his unhindered way to one side, he measured a spot beneath the Factor's ear, a spot a trifle toward the back, and straining forward with all his weight, he struck him with the acme of his power. McConnel went down like a

shot. For a moment he lay and quivered and not a muscle in the crowd slipped from its taut stringing. Sylvestor leaned forward and watched. But this man had not lived his clean and rugged life for naught. The vitality within his giant frame was not to give up without its last ounce of resistance. He lifted his blind head and crawled, first to his knees, and then, wavering, to his feet, still reaching darkly for Sylvestor. The other waited until he was steadier on his feet and then went back to his punishment. In every heart in Fort Lu Cerne had smouldered blame of the Factor, but, even so, this was beyond enduring, this unthinkable punishing that was beating slowly into the thing he was, a strong man.

"*Merci!*" whispered young Henri Corlier, and then with the impetuosity of youth he cried aloud:

"It is enough, *M'sieu!*"

But Sylvestor, become in the beholding eyes a thing of wonder, paid no heed. There was no mercy in his unrelenting face. He was keeping his word to Lois and he meant to keep it to the letter. He knew with his sharp instinct that he would never be able to force atonement from McConnel living, therefore he meant to kill him.

And he would surely have done it had not the power of Chance taken it out of his hands,—

Chance, the protector of the under dog, who at that last moment, when McConnel was panting and veritably near his death with all the strength of his big hands still flowing in them in an agony of desire to get hold of some tangible thing that they might wring, threw within the scope of them, groping, one of Sylvestor's wrists as he reached for the landing of another stroke. That great hand, groping blindly, snapped shut. There was a sharp report and the bone cracked smartly. With a motion indescribable in its beast-like suggestion, McConnel drew Sylvestor to him and his wavering fingers crept up to his throat. They fastened there, and clung, and the silent circle leaned farther forward. For a moment they stood there, swaying drunkenly as the greater weight of McConnel dominated them both, and at last the flying, nimble form of Sylvestor was still, terribly still in that grip that had been dying, literally, with its might unexpended.

McConnel squeezed the breath out of him and listened deafly for its whistle. Not a muscle of Sylvestor's writhing body availed him. In a breath the tables had been turned completely.

McConnel was killing him. The red blood in his face became blue-black, his mouth gagged open, his eyes started. And so just did it seem at the moment that those gathered there uttered no

sound, forgetting who it was that McConnel held across his swaying knee.

And then of a sudden the big man straightened up, his fingers relaxed their terrific grasp and Sylvester slid to the ground.

"Tak' him awa'," he said thickly, "tak' him awa'."

CHAPTER X

MESHES OF A TANGLED WEB

THEY did take him away, when he had regained his breath, and since the small room at Headquarters was henceforth to be too small to hold them both, it was destined for the cabin of Blanc Corlier to have the honour of holding this stranger who bore the mystic seal of the Company's approbation. He walked among them, upright, holding his dangling right hand in his left, and the thin, flushed face of him was a study in its defeat. Palo Le Roc, quiet and resourceful, picked up on the way a little slab and split it into many. When they had reached the cabin he took command and with deft fingers and the cunning of the Crees, whom he knew well, he set the broken bones in a wound splint. It was a neat thing, quick and common, and it ended the incident, except for the sight of McConnel going slowly with wavering steps that took more time than had the longer journey to accomplish, across the steps of Headquarters.

He was alone and sorely bruised, yet none ac-

companied him. So ever begins the fall of those who rule.

“ ’Tis a wild state the post is coming to, Lois,” said Marcel next day with furrowed brows, “ the Factor, he keep’ indoors an’ the other nurse’ his broken wrist all las’ night, so Blanc, he tell Eustace this morning, an’ I don’ like the copper mist in the Red Hills yonder. An evil time looks from the future upon Fort Lu Cerne. I wish that Father Tenau was due from Henriette.”

And she looked uneasily toward her cabin where her pathetic idol, the child, lingered in sleep.

Lois, tending her work of the house, smiled slowly.

“ Cease the worry, Marcel,” she said, “ ’tis no spirit work, the state of things, and the Red Hills have cast their light before.”

“ But only to presage the pestilence, *ma chère*, — I feel the creep, an’ Simple John come’ whispering in the dusk las’ night of the great sickness. I am vex’ with that Simple John. He whisper,—so,—an’ wave the hand to the north an’ be mysterious an’ pass on in the night toward Headquarters. ’Tis of a strangeness how the Factor lets him come an’ go like one of the Company itself. An’ Father Tenau not due for another month.”

The usual cheer of Marcel had deserted her. She went back along the wide way between the

cabins and the furrow was still between her brows.

But Lois Le Moyne worked at the shining cabin with a calm face.

Far out on the banks of Wau-gash stream Pierre Vernaise gloomed sullenly beside a tiny fire that crackled merrily in the warm sun, his gun forgotten beside him and the heart in his breast sore with a new sadness that would not be assuaged, nor find curing as had all previous troubles of its kind in the laughter of the next woman's face. 'An aching sadness sat upon the soul of the merry youth that softened it beyond belief, filling it with a dim longing for the greater things, the yearning of self-worthiness, the desire of sacrifice. Those diffident loiterings at the guardhouse window had done more to turn to higher ways the currents of his life than had all the prayers and penances of the good father. This day he battled with himself, and strove to down the murder-lust that assailed him at thought of Sylvestor, because Love had been born within him in its rightful name, the love that lays down its life for the beloved, a new thing to Pierre Vernaise.

At the Corlier cabin Sylvestor with frowns of vexation laboured to present his customary appearance of natty clothes and silky hair and beard, grooming himself with one awkward hand, the while uncertain thoughts surged through his mind.

He had done his best for this girl whose winning possessed him like a mania, had honestly tried to kill a man that the shadow of disgrace might be removed from her beholding eyes, had failed, completely and unexpectedly, and now he was uncertain, for the first time really concerned about the outcome.

She was not like any woman that he had known, this Lois, with her wonderful promise of hidden things and her belying face and poise. Too often he had seen the melting look in her face follow swiftly on that of cold and frowning hauteur. Which was truth? Which was the real Lois? For the soul of him he could not tell, and the uncertainty fired his longing for her to a more consuming flame. He would have her against all things, even herself if need be. So he preened and thought.

And in the rough sanctuary of Headquarters on this morning there sat one other figure in this small drama of the wilderness,—McConnel, the Factor, with his stern face, bruised and blackened, bent silently at his accustomed work. Not a line of him had lost its suggestion of massive strength, no tremour of the giant form betrayed a lessening of the stern zeal that had made him serve his god, the H. B. Company, forever, even at the galling cost of his own desire.

What thoughts kept him company, what disciplining his primeval spirit, surging sullenly within him, received at his own hands, none might know. He took no notice of those of the populace who passed softly by the open door nor did he seem to take any pains to avoid them. Once he accosted Marc Baupre and sent him on some matter of daily affair to the cabin of a trapper beside the southern wall.

A tight drawn feeling of strain settled down on the little settlement so lost in the great wilderness of forest and blue sky.

The days crept away, warmer, longer in their hours of sunlight, more languorous, bringing in the full glow of the short summer of the North Country, and for a time nothing changed in Fort Lu Cerne.

Big Jean Mercier still lay on the bed in the corner of his cabin, a pitiful shadow of the mighty man he had been, with Marie tending by hand and foot in an uneasy anxiety that grew with the passing days; Marcel Roque sang to her child in the soft evenings, and little Jaqua began to sit for hours staring into the dusk with big eyes that saw only pictures of a handsome youth afar on the wandering trails. As for Lois Le Moyne, she passed back and forth as she had ever done, silent, apart, bearing herself with her old poise that had changed neither with the shame of imprisonment

or the pride of conquest that flaunted itself openly in Sylvestor's devotion. Not a maid in the post but envied her, not a matron but thought of her chance of worldly gain, of the vistas that stretched before her in the centres of civilisation far below the gloom of the north forest. For Sylvestor paid her open court, begging with eloquent eyes and lips for the decision that he sought. But Lois hung her head and the straight line of her lips drooped pathetically at the corners.

"No," she said ever, "no, M'sieu," and the slim fingers plaited the print of her gown, "I cannot. It is of the bitterness, the shadow that would stand before my face in the future. It would be madness, M'sieu. No."

Whereat Sylvestor would rage in his impotence, despairing of success and the flame of his love flared higher. Which thing did not escape the girl.

"I swear that I will kill this Factor so soon as I can hold a gun! He shall pay the debt of your ignominy with his life. Then it will be all clear, Lois, and you will marry me then and come away with me? The summer is here and the journey down will be a dream of heaven with the blue sky and the cool woods and the stars at night. I will forgo my ambition of advancement. When I wipe it clear you will come to me?"

But the pensiveness did not leave her face with

his passionate words. "And what would his death avail me, M'sieu? That is quick and merciful, the instant going out, and there would still remain the shadow. 'Twould be, what think you, M'sieu, of atonement for those bitter nights when one, innocent, lay in the dark of the guardhouse while those outside whispered among themselves? Ah, M'sieu my friend, death would strike him in a callous place. He would not care for that. What is death to the humiliation that eats the very soul? You have my thanks, my deep thanks that will not forget, for the kindness of the thought, but—no. Some day I will avenge myself."

And saying that, she would say no more, and Sylvestor went away feeling in his shallow soul such anguish of desire as filled him with a scourging pain.

The warmth of the sun grew in its ardour. The little winds that played on the harps of spring a few weeks back had sung themselves to sleep and the timid flowers had shrunk back to make way for their more regal sisters.

On the banks of the small streams the great red lilies flaunted their glowing beauty to the peeping sky and by her door the golden trailer that Pierre had brought to Lois at the guardhouse lifted bravely great golden-throated bells. With

a frank gentleness, such as marked her dealings with Marcel Roque, the girl had tended the slender thing until now it rewarded her with a glad glory that each day looked up at her from its velvet face.

There was no work in Fort Lu Cerne. This was the season of idleness and the trappers lounged and gossiped, for there was much to feed the whispered speech these days.

In the warm sun the old men, tottering on their sticks, gathered in little knots and talked with senile laughter of all things, though when Old Jaques, brave in his finery of fringed leggings, of soft shirt and flaunting sash, for he had never lost his love of gay colours, came near they ceased the whispers and spoke of other things. And these old men were not the only ones who tattled in speculation of many sorts. The women, ever hardest to their kind, never tired of finding reasons for the strange doings and silences of Lois Le Moyne, who had lain in the guardhouse rather than tell of that visit to the Factor's room in the shameful dusk, nor of whispering of two men who fought because of her, yet one loved her and the other punished her. It was, of a truth, a fruitful subject and one that seemed to give promise of many things all of which bore the stamp of mystery and excitement. For Marcel Roque, loyal, fiery, ever

ready with that tongue of hers which was as a two-edged blade, there was unending scope.

Coming unexpectedly upon a group of women by the well who filled their pails and chattered with unwholesome unction she sailed in among them and rated them without mercy.

"Take shame!" she cried, "you, Lucil Du Bois, who have a daughter of your own of the same years as Lois! A mother, an' you talk, so, like an evil witch, of the girl! Take the care, Lucil, that it does not come home to you, your evil word, an' roost on your own doorstep. Mon Dieu! you women! I am shame' for you. Have you naught better to talk about? An' Lois who never had a mother! Pick at her back like the vultures that wait for the moose to die. You don' say the same to the girl's face! Voila! A brave lot! But it is ever so. Never one is above the many in face and heart and soul but the little ones they whisper an' laugh an' talk to hide their own smallness! I am the friend of Lois an' you talk not so while I am 'round. You hear me, all."

"Merci!" laughed a young woman of plain features, "one would think that Marcel spoke from the knowledge! Perhaps *you* know what the high headed hussy did in the Factor's room?"

"No!" flared Marcel, "nor want to until Lois shall tell me in her own good time! I know *Lois*,

which is of the sufficiency." And she left them secure in the victory of that rare and precious thing, the inner perception which sees through the outer mazes to the heart of things.

But over and over, by day and night, she fought Lois' battles and thereby fed and strengthened her own loyal love of the girl, for not even her sturdy defence could stop the tongues that found diversion only in the little happenings of the tiny world of the stockade.

They looked askance at Lois, even the while they envied her, for her beauty, for her unbending calm and the contempt that sat so openly on her brow, for the devotion of Sylvester and even for the hatred that she seemed to compel from McConnel, the silent, who vouchsafed to no other woman even the compliment of dislike.

Warmer and yet warmer grew the days. Over the distant hills to the north the dull copper haze deepened and spread its uncanny hue across the heavens. Many an eye in that vast wilderness of country watched it uneasily, the white settlers at the posts, the red dwellers in the forests gazing alike at its portentous glow and making obeisance to their different gods. The wise old heads shook and the tongues of experience prophesied. In the villages of the Ojibways thin columns of smoke arose from the ceremonial fires and they danced

the Spirit Dance. This Pierre Vernaise knew, for he wandered among them at last, driven by the sadness that would not let him rest, nor return to the post because of the fear that he might find it empty with an intolerable loneliness, Lois Le Moyne having gone the long trail with the blond man from Henriette.

The Ojibways were hospitable, being friends of the post, and their fires were open to him. Here he found a peace which the forest had not given, for the dark skinned people made room for him with a stately welcome and then let him sit among them without question. Only Mahwahna, a grave and wrinkled chief, ever spoke of the trouble that sat upon the young man's face.

They smoked the peace pipe at Mahwahna's fire in the warm evening, for an Indian camp is not a camp without its fire, though it be only a slim spiral of blue smoke above a coal or two, and the old man gravely scanned the other's features.

"My brother is sad," he said simply, "if it be matter of debt at the H. B. Company, there be many ponies in the herd of Mahwahna. Also there be some skins not yet traded."

The changing eyes of the French half-breed clouded with quick moisture.

"Mahwahna is indeed my brother and my

friend," he said, speaking in the Ojibway tongue, "whose words I shall keep in my heart, but mine is a trouble which he cannot help,—a trouble of a woman."

So Pierre was left to smoke and ponder with a courtesy perfect in its kindness. He watched the ceremonies that went on day by day and presently he questioned:

"My brothers fear a disaster?" he asked.

"The Spirit of the Great Sickness hovers over the north woods," they told him, "and Oshonee, medicine man, has seen the canoe of the Damned sail through the sky at the close of day. Also the Loup Carou has cried three nights in the forest."

And Pierre, half Indian himself, crossed himself and a new uneasiness was added to his heavy load. He thought of Fort Lu Cerne and wondered sadly if Lois and Sylvestor were gone. He hoped, almost, that they were.

The Great Sickness that falls but once in, it may be, a matter of twenty years, is a thing to fear, sparing none, reaching with its skeleton hand for those whom it should pass, the young, the strong, the beautiful.

So Pierre got from Mahwahna a candle with the stamp of the H. B. Company in its tallow side and burned it before the small crucifix which he carried always in his pocket.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT RESULT

IN the days of his convalescence Sylvestor pondered much. His quick mind was forming a plan that delighted him in its completeness. Over and over he spread out the details of all that had happened and all that was to happen and studied their bearing on the situation. He kept clear of McConnel, nursed his broken arm and pulled his silky beard, musing.

Lois had said with that cool tone of finality which there was no gainsaying, that she could not marry him because of the uncleared shadow of her disgrace, and that the killing of her persecutor would not lift it. It must be a living expiation, that which freed her, but how compass it?

Nothing in the world, he knew, would ever force her clearance from the Scotchman's lips, since in the heavy processes of his intelligence he had elected to punish her. Sylvestor could well follow these processes. First, the Factor, cast-iron, slow, elemental in his passions, had looked with favour on this regal girl whose like was not in all the place of Sylvestor's travels.

True to his nature he had decided to have her. So he told her of his intention. Sylvestor could see and hear him as he did this, stolid, matter-of-course, without passion or tact or winsomeness, making of it as much a matter of every day as the casting of his accounts. He could see too, the cold eyes of the girl, the disdainful lift of the head as she turned away, vouchsafing no word, silent in her scorn of him that needed no justification. So had, very probably, been the beginning, when McConnel had awakened to the realisation that he had been disdained in the deepest feeling of his nature,—he, the Factor of Fort Lu Cerne, a power in his small world. What had passed in that peculiar soul of his Sylvestor could picture also, the slow rage that had fanned itself into a flame, feeding on the sight of her each day, brooding in the lonely nights, until the anger and the humiliation had devised a way of squaring a resentment that was unbearable. So McConnel had himself hidden the book, and laid the theft on Lois. Whether the girl had ever been in the room at Headquarters Sylvestor even doubted. True, she had not denied it, but was not that strange pride of spirit which would not let her explain further than to assert her innocence, responsible for that also? Sylvestor as fully believed in her innocence as in McConnel's guilt.

And so he planned a way of reparation for the one and of punishment for the other. Which thing was not so much to his credit as he thought, for it was not wholly of his own devising.

He walked around the settlement, talking to one and another, making much of the shy children, placing himself on a frank, familiar footing that found favour in the eyes of the many, who liked the new feeling of equality with one in a high place, one even above the Factor, for all knew that he bore the Company's favour. The older men, Blanc Corlier, Henri Boef and a grizzled voyageur or two, accepted him with a grain of salt, standing aloof from one who boasted self importance, yet dissipated it by prodigal association with his inferiors. One there was who would have naught to do with him,—Simple John, who shut the door of his cabin in his face and peered timidly with frowning eyes through the latch-string hole.

McConnel kept to his accustomed ways, the hours of the morning spent at his desk, a solitary walk out toward, and sometimes beyond, the great gate that opened into the forest, and his pipe and his thoughts in the cool dusk before his house, and they two did not meet. Sylvestor was waiting to think out every detail of his plan. And when he had perfected it, even to what he would say to those yet beyond him in authority when he

should return to the beaten paths of mankind, he sought Lois Le Moyne.

The passing of time had deepened and enhanced his passion for the girl, and he had reached a state in his uncontrolled desire of her wherein he would have sold his eternal soul to win her favour. That he believed he had won, for the drooping eyes and the poised, yet yielding, attitude of her always told to his experienced mind their own tale of portent. Yet though she loved him he knew that she would keep her word and that not until the dipping scales of justice, heavy with her disgrace, had lifted to the level with a public exoneration, could he ever hope to marry her and take her away.

He had taken, early and deliberately, the license of her hands, holding them gently in his own at times when he pled his cause, and the cool strong touch of them pulsed the hot blood in his face as no other woman's lips had ever done, and he had had knowledge of many. He felt and knew within him that this girl's hands were as virgin as her heart, that his touch was the first to profane their firm, cold chastity, and, unlike the care-free youth, Pierre Vernaise, whose soul had humbled and chastened itself at the very thought, he surged and gloated at the reality.

Now he took her hands and held them close in

his uninjured one, and his pale eyes burned sleepily.

"Lois!" he said, while the voice in his throat leaped with his feeling, "Lois, I have thought it all out at last! I have found a way, not *from* McConnel, but *through* and *over* him. Fort Lu Cerne shall see where rests the real suspicion of a power greater than this Factor, with his clumsy methods, his cheap presumption and his small revenge. I shall clear you, my royal queen, and then,—claim you!"

Once more Lois bowed her head to hide her eyes. She was looking ahead at a consummation.

That was on a morning and from the Le Moyne cabin Sylvestor went, himself, on a tour of the post, blythe, exulting, filled with the spirit of success, swelling with authority, finding a huge joy in the dramatic possibilities of the situation which lay so wholly now within his hands. From cabin to cabin he strolled, leaving at each a mysterious word, a grave command that its legal head be at the door of Headquarters an hour by sun that evening.

After his leisurely line of progress ran a whiffle of excitement, like fire in prairie grass. Eyes were wide and tongues stumbled over themselves and each other in their eagerness. The women ran from house to house, surging with the joy of gossip, badgering the girl's name from lip to lip, and

the men gathered in wondering knots and groups.

Marcel Roque lost more than her temper and slapped the wife of Marc Baupre. "Jackals!" she cried in her anger, "Hyenas! Skulkers in that safety of numbers! Would to the good God Father Tenau was here that he might give you all the penance of the Evil Tongue!"

But nothing could quell the tumult of excitement that Sylvestor had stirred up. All through the sunny hours of the day they buzzed and gabbled and watched for chance developments. Long before the appointed time the men began to gather in little groups within a careless distance of Headquarters, all eyes keen for the appearance of either Sylvestor or McConnel. It was the end of a golden day, that. The sun, which had glowed all day in its glory, dropped gently toward the west where the rim of the mighty forest made a dusky couch of sable velvet to receive it, casting long lavender shadows shot through with gilt and crimson athwart the peaceful settlement.

Out of the twilight darkness of the woods came the eerie cry of a night bird calling plaintively to its mate. 'An indefinable touch of pathos seemed to breathe in the calm air, and no one felt its timid presence. No one? There was one whose vague soul quivered to the undertone, Simple John, who

slipped about uneasily, peering wistfully into the faces of the men.

Promptly at the appointed hour Sylvestor came from the Corlier cabin and approached the bare space before the Factor's house. He was immaculate in his finery of soft garments, of white linen and of shining hair and beard.

He waved his free hand, white and well kept, in a commanding circle and the curious groups closed in.

"My friends," he said, taking the centre of the space thus enclosed, "my friends of Fort Lu Cerne, as the representative of the H. B. Company I am about to perform a grave and solemn office, one which fills me with distaste, but which I feel must be performed, not only for the good of Fort Lu Cerne, but for the best interests of the Company itself, whose welfare comes before all else in the minds and hearts of those who serve it. Monsieur Le Roc, will you please to summon here Mr. McConnel, the Factor?"

He said no more, but stood in the soft light, slim, commanding, a trifle theatrical in a thoughtful pose, caressing his broken wrist that still hung in a white sling from his neck.

Palo Le Roc dropped out of the circle, which numbered every man in the post who could walk, and went over the step and in at the big door of

Headquarters standing open in the warm evening. McConnel was in his little room beyond, clearing away the remnants of his solitary meal, slow, methodical, neat as a woman in his woman's work, and to Palo there seemed, suddenly, something pathetic about this big sombre man, stubborn, blundering, his feet sounding hollowly on the bare boards as he went back and forth in the dusk.

He delivered his message with the nearest approach to liking he had ever felt for the Factor of Fort Lu Cerne, and the other straightened his stooping shoulders, put down a pan he held, and together they passed back through the big room. As they passed the gate in the railing and the squat desk rising but little above it, McConnel cast a swift glance toward the bare little space that had stood for the consummation of his life's work.

It was a peculiar glance, half bewildered, as if already he felt a presentiment of some great calamity. And then they passed out and the circle opened to receive them. McConnel cast a look across the crowd, gathered so suddenly and in such force, and strode into its centre. He stood facing Sylvestor squarely, his leonine head lifted and his steely eyes boring into the complaisant countenance of the other.

"I'm here," he said simply.

Sylvestor deigned him no notice. Instead he faced the circle of men and began to speak.

"People of Fort Lu Cerne," he said clearly, "not one of you but knows of the mysterious disappearance some months ago of the great book of accounts from the Factor's desk at Headquarters. Not one of you but knows the painful circumstances that have followed that disappearance, the accusation of theft laid upon you all that you might hide the amount of your debt to the Company because of the poor winter that has passed, the fastening upon a young girl of your number of the crime itself at the instigation of all of you, the throwing into a gloomy guardhouse for many weeks of that young girl, the merciless shooting down before your eyes of another of your number in your right and manly attempt to liberate a woman from such ignominy, and the continued absence and lack of endeavour to find and produce the book. All of this you know. But you do not know what I have good and sufficient reason for believing and accepting as the truth,—that all of this heart-rending trouble which has lain so heavily upon you, especially in those two homes made more than desolate, has been the outcome of such fiendish spite that only the great hand of the Company itself can avail to right the wrong. I solemnly be-

lieve, and say to you, that this man standing here has been the instigator of it all. What evidence I have and my reasons for this belief are matters for those at Henriette. And this brings me before my time to a place I should have reached some months later,—for I must tell you now that I was destined of my uncle, Governor Stanton, to be Factor of Fort Lu Cerne in the coming spring.

“Therefore, in view of my coming authority and for the good of the post, knowing it would be the will of the Governors at Henriette, I propose to take command at once, deposing this man, Angus McConnel, branding him as thief and maltreater, and freeing you all from the taint of ill dealing. And I would have you know that above all else I do exonerate that one who has suffered most of all, not only within herself, but in the eyes of the populace, Lois Le Moyne. This may be irregular, but I have the backing of those in authority, and take the consequences upon myself. From this time forth you are to look upon me as your Factor.”

Sylvestor ceased and a silence like the silence of death itself fell upon the crowd gathered there in the fast gathering twilight.

All eyes turned to McConnel.

He stood where he had first stayed foot, and

the look on his grim face went home to many a heart, prejudiced against him though they were.

The light was behind his sandy head and the pale reflection from the east fell upon his lifted features. It was as if a sacriligious hand had profaned an idol before a pale faced priest bound hand and foot in the holy heart of the temple. The lines around the mouth that made it so stern were sunk deep and downward, the lips themselves, narrow and firm, betrayed in their very steadiness the soul of the man cut to its quick. The blue-steel of the eyes, cold and sharp as points of light, held their stubborn dignity with an effort. So he stood before them, this Factor who had not spared them in his indomitable justice and zeal for the Company which was his god, and took his ruin from that Company. In his heart dumb and stupid in its sudden disaster, he was saying over and over that, after all, blood was thicker than good service and a life's devotion. Stanton had betrayed him.

A moment so, and then he said, and his voice was steady,—

“If that is all?”

Some tiny inflection of the tone nettled Sylvester, some vague hint of that force within this man which had made him Factor of the Company now defied its power to crush him.

"Yes," said Sylvestor sharply, "it is all,—and enough."

McConnel turned and plodded slowly with his accustomed gait through the crowd, which gave way before him, up the step and in at Headquarters, closing the door behind him.

The dusk seemed to fall quickly after that, with the circle shifting uneasily and Sylvestor standing for a moment in the centre, strangely at a loss for once, slightly abashed as to what he should do next. Presently he broke the awkward pause with a little laugh, greatly at variance with the tone of that which had passed, and started to shoulder his way out toward the edge.

He did not go toward the *Le Moyne* cabin, walking away with *Blanc Corlier* to where the early candles guttered in the windows.

The crowd broke up in little groups that stood around in the dusk and talked in half-awed whispers, wondering and still, and they did not know, these men, whether they were glad or not for their collective vindication.

But within the small enclosure in the big hushed room, McConnel, the some time Factor of Fort Lu Cerne, laid his heavy arms on the rude desk and dropped his face upon them and for the first time in his primitive life a few scant tears, scalding and bitter, forced their hard way from his unyield-

ing eyes to drop, one by one, upon the badge of his ambition,—that same desk of a Factor of the Company.

And presently a hand touched his knee, a fluttering hand with a vague, uncertain touch, and up from the floor beside him there rose, grotesquely, the peering face of Simple John, dim and indistinct in the shadows.

The idiot leaned near and boldly, yet with a strange gentle seeming of sympathy, put a hand on the man's shoulder.

“Master!” he whimpered, “Master!”

CHAPTER XII

MEMORIES OF FORT LU CERNE — WHEN THE RED HILLS THREATEN

EARLY on the following morning Sylvestor sent by the clerk Henri a written document to Headquarters, wherein he commanded in legal terms McConnel to abdicate, closing the blockhouse, all but the store room, the keys to which he should give to Palo Le Roc, who would deliver them to him.

It was a heavy document, filled with impressive phrases, and Sylvestor sat up half the night perfecting it painfully with his left hand. There was something in the back of his sensitive consciousness which made him put into it all the force of legality and power that he could muster — an uneasy feeling of uncertainty.

He despatched it with a vague misgiving and then sat in the cool morning shadow of the cabin while old Blanc's young wife prepared the breakfast.

They rose early, the people of Fort Lu Cerne. The sun was yet invisible behind the dense wall of the sleeping forest and the cool of the night hung

softly over the world. The sky was a soft pale blue with a flush of pink in the east like the rose in a bride's cheeks, and long streaks of gold shot widely up across the illimitable expanse of the deep, far heavens. Sylvestor fell to thinking dreamily of the woman for whose sake he had tried to do so much, and for whose sake again he would do anything that a whimsical and perverse Fate might set before him. He leaned comfortably against the wall of the Corlier cabin, fresh and well clad as always, his thin face somewhat pale from the long hours of the past night spent in thought and effort, and his eyes full of pleasant dreams.

Presently old Blanc came out and joined him.

"A hot day, M'sieu," he said, shaking his head, "a hot day again. Yesterday was too hot for an easy mind, the more so since a loon trailed its unholy laughter low across the post last night at dark."

Sylvestor laughed.

"A very harmless bird, Corlier. The weather is growing very warm, I'll admit, but you must remember that the summer is full upon us. Isn't it always so at this time of the year?"

Blanc picked up a sliver from the ground at his feet and began to shape it into a fantastic toy with a huge knife that always hung at his belt.

He was a deliberate man, yet one ever ready with his tongue.

“No, M’sieu,” he said presently. “Not altogether. It is warm, hot even, yes, always at this time of year, but not as it is now. Not as it is now, when the Red Hills do not burn against the sky. Look you, M’sieu, to the north yonder. They have look’ so only once since I can remember in the history of Fort Lu Cerne. True, there have been times before, twice before, but that was when I was young, a venturesome youngster buying my life each day from the Indians at the gun mouth, an’ long before there was aught on the site of Fort Lu Cerne but the Big Woods. Since,— ’twas twenty full year back. You have not seen, M’sieu, the small pieces of a black habit hidden in the altar of the church yonder? True — the good father has not been to the post since you have been among us. ’Tis part of a habit of the Order of the Sacred Heart, an’ ’twas worn by that small, fair saint, the little Sister Felice whose spotless life was sacrific’ that Fort Lu Cerne, scourged by the Great Sickness, might be spared in its misery.

“ ’Tis a tale sad in its telling.

“That year the Red Hills burn’ in the north an’ the heat came down, quick, like it fall this time, swift, without grace of more than a week of growing, a sudden heat, an’ the flowers dry up on the

stalks an' the streams shrivel in their beds an' the people began to sicken in the post. You can see yet the row of mounds behin' the church. That was how they died,— Eh, mon dieu! 'Tis no pleasant thing to recall, M'sieu. The little ones an' the young maids an' the mothers,—the youths strong in their red-cheeked health, they all went down like the ripe corn. Merci! how swift they died! There was pretty Aline Leoise an' Marie Duboff an' Petri Bordier—a harvest rich in its gain of youth. We sent a courier quick down the long trail by wood and water in the big streams, to Father Tenau, a young man then, an' from his convent an' his monastery, an' small log missions in the wilderness beyond Henriette to the west, he brought his monks an' sisters to aid the stricken post. Mon Dieu! How they wept an' laughed an' reached their eager hands for help, those sick ones, when that line came marching into Fort Lu Cerne! An' at the tail, M'sieu, *she* came, the little Sister Felice, meek an' small an' with her eyes downcast an' her rosary at her side! Ah, such beauty! Even those far gone in the sickness looked on her with joy.

“They were indeed angels from the good God, those calm faced ones, ministering to the ill, consoling the dying. An' then, M'sieu, came that black morning when the Crees an' the Blackfeet,—

it was before the Crees were friends of the post an' were allied to that powerful and almost unknown tribe,—dropped in a night, encircled the post an' demanded a white sacrifice from those at Fort Lu Cerne to appease the Great Spirit that had afflicted them, for they had died like sheep for a long time before the sickness reached us here."

The narrator stopped a moment and inspected the toy which had neared completion. Sylvester was watching him with his sleepy eyes wide. He was deeply interested in this tale of the past.

"The Factor, McKilgore, an' a good man, swore to fight till the last log in the stockade was riddled. It was a good wall then, 'tis not so good now." Blanc raised his white head and looked all around the peaceful scene where the pale blue light had turned to deepest rose and gold of day. His wife called from behind in the door that the early meal was ready, but the two men sat on.

"It was a hopeless chance just the same. The Indians were there by thousands an' it was of a uselessness, the holding out. They knew it, all. 'Twas but the waste of all the lives in the post, an' so, M'sieu, this little nun, this small Sister Felice, with the face of an angel, fill' but with the spirit of the Christ, she rush' out the gate before any perceive' what she would do an' throw herself into

the hands of the fiends that wait an' howl without. The little gate, there toward the south, where a path went out to a spring beyond.—

“It was enough. They took her, M'sieu, those spawn of hell, an' all within the post wait' an' cower, an' the women whimper an' the faces of the men were white. I remember.— I was young then M'sieu, an' I cared only to die that moment with the horror. But the Factor, he hold the gate an' command no man to move. One in command must ever act for the good of the many, M'sieu,— an' after,— they raise' aloft a long pole an' over the stockade look' the face, the lovely little face of Sister Felice.— But the post was safe.

“They marched away, those Indians, an' we saw them no more. That was in the savage days. Now they have turn' most, to the religion, an' Father Tenau he hold' them all in the hollow of his hand. But still there remain' within the church altar those pieces of the black habit which the Factor picked up before the little gate. An', M'sieu, that year the copper mist hung, so, in the Red Hills. Yes, Cleo, we come to the meal.”

Sylvestor lifted himself as from a long cramp and looked incredulously toward the little church standing out with its face toward the light and in

its cool shadow he could perceive a row of graves.

He shook his head wonderingly and turned to follow old Blanc into the cabin.

As he did so a boy handed him a missive. It was scrawled in McConnel's painful writing and it said abruptly, without preface:

"I will not forsake my duties as Factor of Fort Lu Cerne until you or another is duly sworn and established with the sign of the Company at Henriette to take my place.

"ANGUS MCCONNEL."

He read it and put it in a pocket and for some reason he was not surprised at its contents. It seemed as if the uncertainty and the misgiving had crystallised in this defiance. He knew now that he had not expected McConnel to obey.

The anger that was always in him toward this crude, opposing force rose high and he swore beneath his breath, though he was calmness itself as he sat at meat with these simple people. He knew he had struck a master blow, that no punishment in this life or the next would ever flail the soul of McConnel as did the casting out of him from the place of Factor. Yet in his humiliation, bitter, he knew, to this silent man as had ever been the ignominy of the guardhouse to Lois, he still stood

out against him, holding the last card in this game of give and take.

Still in the eyes of the populace he had done what he had intended — disgraced McConnel, lifted the girl by the shifting of the load of suspicion, and he was, in a measure, satisfied. It only remained for him to take now the good the gods provided and then the long journey down to civilisation under the amorous sun by day and the stars by night, for he contemplated a trip to Henriette that he might gain at once the approbation of the Governors for his deed. This Father Tenau was due before a great while and he could marry them. To save his life Sylvestor could not keep the warm dreams out of his eyes. Every nerve in his body tingled with the joy of anticipation. So he left the cabin and went abroad in the languorous day. He wanted Lois, wanted her away by herself that he might see in the broad light the full glory of his conquest on her wondrous face. Fate was kind to him, that fickle Fate which plays at shuttlecock with a man's desires, his fears, his hopes, and his ambition.

At the well beside the entrance to the stockade he saw her filling her pails for the day and he hurried to her.

“Put them down, Lois, the pails, and come with

me out along the path to the forest," he cried like a boy. "Come! I have much to say to you. Come, Lois."

The girl looked up and then down, and after a moment she obeyed. But as they two passed out the big gate she turned involuntarily and cast a swift glance back across the post, a strange glance indeed, that had the man observed, might have set him a-wondering, so full was it of confliction.

The grass by the wide trail was already drooping in the kissing warmth and on all the great trees the dark summer leaves hung curled a bit together with their lighter under sides presented to the eye. Lois' dress lay open at the neck, throwing out the milky roundness of her throat below the usual line of her collar, and her sleeves were rolled above her elbows for the better performance of her morning duties at the cabin. Never had she been more desirable to Sylvestor's eyes than at this moment when she was so near the time of her surrender. He did not talk as they passed along the broad trail out from the post and finally entered into the heart of the woods which pushed and crowded so close to the habitation of man. It seemed as if the greatness of his own achievements would choke him. He could not speak and the girl had no desire. They walked on into the grateful heavy shade where the sun could not as

yet reach his eager fingers, on for many moments, until the man at last could wait no longer.

He turned abruptly and faced her.

"Is it enough?" he cried. "Oh, love of my heart, is it enough?"

His free hand was on her shoulder, creeping toward her throat in its eagerness, and his eyes were half shut with the passion that swept him, let loose at last. The girl straightened her young body and raised her head. She, too, was filled with emotions that surged like a sea, triumph that gloated in a secret joy, hatred that all through the hours of a sleepless night had sated itself on a picture of a man torn from the pinnacle of his life's pride, cast out from honour in the face of the people, branded, disgraced, humiliated — aye! even as she had been, pressed down by the higher hand to drink the bitter waters as he had pressed her down, stabbed to his deepest heart by the thing he worshipped even as she had been stabbed by —

She caught the breath on her parted lips and shut them calmly.

"It is enough, M'sieu," she said.

Sylvestor swept her into his embrace, quickly, savagely, this Lois Le Moyne whom no man had ever touched with his little finger, and sated his passionate mouth with kisses.

She suffered herself to be taken without resistance, she yielded her quiescent lips with readiness, but there was something in it, this willing surrender that yet held aloof, as if a young willow bent pliantly to a compelling hand only to spring back to its own place at the moment of release.

And thereby Lois, the lawless, bought and paid for her revenge.

CHAPTER XIII

THE THREAT FULFILLED

THE night that followed these events was most remarkable. At the close of the day when the burning sun went down behind the forest and there should have been the springing up of the little evening breeze, there lay over the post a heavy, silent heat. It was as if the golden disc that ruled the heavens and the earth below had drawn a black glass before his face through which he watched, without forsaking his throne to his gentle spouse, who yearned toward the helpless objects of her lord's wrath, reviving them by the soothing touch of her dewy fingers, the coolness of her scented breath, the pale light of her countenance. The hours of darkness were almost as hot as had been the day.

All over Fort Lu Cerne the doors and windows stood open and from many a cabin came the fretful crying of the children. The restlessness pervaded the atmosphere. From a window near the northern wall there sputtered and shone a candle for a time, then it went out, and presently it was lighted

again. Someone there slept, and awoke, and did some homely task, to settle back to a sleep that would not come, and rose again, and again sought rest. It seemed as if the entire settlement shared an uneasiness, like cattle that stir and grumble and settle drowsily, to stir again all through the herd when there is danger somewhere near. At three of the clock Palo Le Roc stepped out of his house where Tessa tossed wearily. He could not sleep and so he stood on the step in the dark and looked around.

It was very quiet. The dogs sniffled and curled themselves and got up and lay down, without lessening the sense of silence. Presently Palo discerned a figure standing like himself, silent, looking around, a dim shape in the opening. He stepped softly off the sill and approached.

It was Marc Baupre.

"The rest, it will not come, eh, Marc?" said Palo.

"Not all the night," returned the other.

"It is some evil. The feeling is abroad."

They spoke in hushed voices that seemed to go with the night.

"Assuredly."

"Again last dusk the loon that is nesting late below the Wau-gash cried its infernal call above the palisade."

"I know. Netta is whimpering in the cabin now with the low spirits."

"And the blue heron circled three times over the enclosure two days ago. Beside look you, Marc Baupre, to the Red Hills."

Palo Le Roc, trapper in the Ragged Lands, hunter, voyageur, knew the signs of the evil things like an Indian.

The two men turned to the north.

Far up the reach of the dark sky there glowed a pale ghost of the deep copper hue that hung steadily above the range of hills by day.

"Nom de Dieu!" said Marc, frowning, "yes!"

"'Tis the sickness," said Palo quietly, "the Great Sickness, and it is near upon us."

"Of a truth, Palo, I believe it."

They stood some time looking at the uncanny light.

"There will be work for the Priest, for it has all the omens of evil. I would that he was here, the good Father. There will be many go without the shriveing this time."

"And the women—— They are more at the ease when the hand of the church is stretch' out within reach. Look you, how still is the post, yet it is there, the unrest."

"Fort Lu Cerne is indeed in the throes of trouble. How it will end, this other, between the

Factor and Sylvestor, we know not. Things are of a strain without the sickness."

A dog somewhere at the southern part of the settlement lifted its throat and howled long and dolorously.

"Sacre! 'Tis the last touch, that warning," said Le Roc.

Marc Baupre shivered.

"But we get like the old women," he said with a short laugh, "we whimper before we are hit."

"Blanc Corlier has known it from the early spring. We have need to prepare ourselves. I have many bunches of herbs already drying in the chimney throat. But I wish we could get one of the old women of the Crees—— They know more."

Palo was thinking of Tessa.

"Voila! If that young scapegrace, Pierre Vernaise, were but where one might lay the hand upon him it might be possible. He knows every witch and medicine man among them."

"But where is he? He has been gone these many weeks."

"Of a surety,—as he ever is when he is wanted."

Palo turned toward his cabin.

"We must send a courier. Aye, with the light, Baupre. I feel the need."

The two separated and went each back to his cabin, but the sleep that would not come was further from the minds of both than before that meeting in the hushed darkness.

The hours dragged by and the night was almost gone when that for which the post had been waiting came upon it. With the first pale light of day Marie Mercier came hurrying bareheaded along the enclosure two days ago. Beside, look you, whom all who knew him turned in time of trouble.

She struck the open lintel with her knuckles.

"M'sieu Le Roc," she called excitedly, "Palo!"

The man, fully dressed, rose quietly and went out to her.

"What is it, Marie?"

"Come to the house at the instant," she cried, "it is Jean!"

Palo closed the door carefully that Tessa, fallen at last into a troubled slumber, might not wake and hear. Then he turned to Marie and they set out swiftly.

"How is it with Jean?" he queried.

"Merci of God, M'sieu, I fear it is the Sickness! He woke but now with a troubled tongue, raving of other things than he has known these many days, and the eyes of him! Mon Dieu! the eyes of him! So blank, M'sieu, an' bright with

fever." She broke her speech and fell to sobbing a little as they hurried.

When they reached the cabin and entered, Palo Le Roc, who had seen the Sickness before, went straight to the bed in the corner where Big Jean had lain these many weeks.

At the first glance he knew that the grip of the Factor's bullet had given place to a greater foe, in the shadow of whose victory the wasted form on the bed was already entering.

"Marie, you return to the cabin and tell Tessa to give you down the herbs drying in the chimney. Be swift," he said sharply.

Then he set to work on what he felt was a hopeless task, but while life lasted there was hope and no one of this scant handful of human beings hemmed in by the wilderness should go out without an effort on the part of the rest to hold him back.

The hurrying steps in the hot still dawn and the low sobs of the woman brought into the doors the tired inmates of the houses.

"Marie?" called Marcel Roque as she passed. "Is that you, Marie?"

"Yes, an' it has fallen, the Sickness. Out of all the well ones it has touch' the first poor Jean!" and she fled along, sobbing still.

Marcel Roque caught her breath and turned

instinctively to where the wizened child lay on a pallet on the floor.

"Holy Mother!" she whispered, "not him!"

Then she stepped out and bravely set forth to the cabin of the Merciers.

Whatever they were in Fort Lu Cerne, they stood hard by in illness and in death.

In a few moments, while the light was broadening in the east and the warm dusk was turning into hot day, the word had run like fire around the settlement and they began to gather in the yard of the stricken home.

They spoke in awed whispers, standing in little groups, and the great fear was upon them. Within Old Blanc Corlier and Marc Baupre helped Palo to bathe the gaunt form with a warm lotion made of the sweet smelling herbs, and into the hearts of them, so cast about between the warring factions of Fort Lu Cerne, there fell a little more bitterness when they came upon, in Big Jean's side, the yet unhealed wound of the rifle ball, sucked in, black and sullen, between the outstanding ribs.

"Shame!" said Blanc Corlier openly.

"Aye!—more than shame, Blanc," answered Baupre. "Murder. Without this Jean would have his chance with the sickness. Now he has none."

“Hush!” said Le Roc softly. “Marie is there at the step.”

And so began the fight in the settlement.

All through that day they hung over him, this babbling shadow of a strong man, and through the night and the night that followed, the men standing turns and the women taking care of little Jean that Marie might be free to hover round the bed where she had tended so long, gazing with mist-filled eyes and crossing herself at intervals, muttering prayers.

It could not, of a surety, be of long endurance, the battle, and at dusk of the fourth day Palo Le Roc gravely lighted four candles and did what he could for the passing soul in the absence of the good Father with his tender counsel and his consolation.

All the populace went softly in and out in the twilight, taking a last look at Big Jean quietly breathing his life away, Big Jean who had been so strong, but who lay now as the sickness had caught him, without understanding, only now the restless babbling had departed and the peace of the wearied soul nearing the Great Sleep lay upon him.

All the populace?

One there was who stayed far away, shivering in the Corlier cabin, Sylvestor, nervous, biting his finger nails and frowning, cursing whatever gods

he served that he had not gone from Fort Lu Cerne before this thing befell.

But he was the only one, for on that last night, when the candles burned in the gloom and the trappers and the women stood around, silent, sympathetic, waiting, and Marie sobbed wearily by the white-sheeted bed, a square figure darkened the red light of the dying day in the doorway and McConnel strode in among them. He was the same man that he had ever seemed to the people, stern, heavy, forbidding, but in the hard face of him new lines had graven their difficult way, a subtle change showed dimly forth, as if the hand of pain had swept his features, leaving them bewildered, dazed, half stupid with its revelation. He had taken his hat off at the door, and as he stepped to the bed and looked down at the man lying there, the light of the candles picked out weirdly his square frowning face with its look of stubborn perplexity that was akin to that of some great animal struggling toward a light far off, yet beset and hampered and sore wounded in the dark swamp, his shock of sandy hair, and his mighty shoulders. This was the man who had, in one sense, killed Jean Mercier, and now stood and looked upon him, and the sharp blue of his eyes flickered with changing lights. There was in that look no relenting for the deed he had done, yet

many of those standing in the shadows whose perceptions were sharp with the instinct of the lone places, beheld in it a stern pity that would not break through the unbending reserve which made of his mixed blood a pure Scotchman.

He did not speak, this Angus McConnell, who had done his best for his conception of right and in so doing had persecuted almost beyond enduring this simple people entrusted to his care,—just stood and looked down at Big Jean in the heart-breaking light of the death candles, and his lips were tight. Within that little cabin was gathered the old set of troubles that has overthrown empires and shed blood since the world has stood,—the authority of law, the helplessness of the law abiding, and misunderstanding between the two.

It was a hard moment, yet that very sternness that had made the Factor shoot Big Jean at the guardhouse door in the serving of Right, now brought McConnell to pay the last tribute to him as he was about to depart.

It was near the end of many things and a thousand emotions burned and surged within the dusky room.

Presently the Scotchman turned and strode out the door, silent as he had come. The breath of Big Jean took on suddenly its final struggle as the last light died out of the heavens.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT SICKNESS

THEY buried Big Jean the next morning, with Marie sobbing miserably and Little Jean clinging wide eyed to his mother's skirts. Palo Le Roc read a service, the service that Father Tenau had given them to be said in case of death between his half-yearly trips, and little Jaqua Bleaurot, standing in the dry light of the early day already breathless with heat, lifted her voice, a sweet clear voice like that of a bird in the cool depths of the woods, and sang a requiem, also taught by the priest. They bared their heads, the large circle of the populace, and listened, and only the girl with her face lifted in her solemn song looked toward Heaven, for the fear of the uncanny blight that had fallen upon them held their eyes to the gaping earth.

At one side of the circle, with her back against the church and a hand on Old Jaques' shaking arm, stood Lois Le Moyne, while directly across from her McConnel frowned at the slowly falling clods.

Sylvestor was not there.

This was the beginning, and could that handful of people have seen into the future they would have beheld a strange sight, for it was destined that before many weeks had dragged their anguished length away, Fort Lu Cerne would be an echoing desolation whose people were scattered like chaff in the wind, whose doors stood open, with none to enter, and whose dead lay unburied with naught between them and the pitiless sky but the slender hands of one lone young girl.

But it was well they could not see beyond the day.

As they separated and went back to the little tasks of the households and trivial things of every day, Marcel Roque fell into step beside Lois, carrying little Solierre on her shoulder, where his soft curls brushed her cheek, and walked with the two down the main way.

"Of a verity it has come, *ma chère*," she sighed.

As she spoke, Lois saw her arms tighten involuntarily around the delicate limbs of the child.

This girl was not given to pity and the weaknesses of women, but deep within her peculiar soul she felt a thrill of something that was akin to fear.

This thing had not spared poor Jean in his

helplessness,—what if it should ask of Marcel the sturdy, the strong, the charitable, the good Marcel, this wee and pitiable child, this one idol of her heart?

Lois' brows drew together in a scowl.

How much Marcel was to her self-sufficient spirit she herself did not know, but that lovely quality in the elder woman which had held her standing by in the face of all that had passed, had made her a thing apart, woman above women, a friend that was worthy of the name.

Lois looked into her face.

"Fear not, Marcel," she said, "fear not."

Marcel caught the look and its understanding.

"Yes," she said simply, "there I am the coward, Lois,—an' I am weak at the knees this minute. It could not be,—it would not be permit of le bon Dieu, yet I am of the terror unspeakable."

With a motion infinite in its tenderness, she slipped her hand up the tiny body until it rested yearningly upon the misshapen shoulders.

She did not speak again, but walked on, lost in reverie.

At her door she nodded to Lois and Jaques and passed in out of the sun, the beautiful face of the boy looking back across her shoulder.

Old Jaques cackled senilely as he tottered along.

"The big an' the strong an' the young, they

go an' here am I," he chuckled, "an' like to be here when the sickness abates."

Lois shuddered.

"Hush!" she said sharply.

That night at dusk Sylvestor came to the Le Moyne door. He had kept indoors all day, never showing his head while the sun was above the horizon. An insane desire for immediate flight had come over him, crowding to the wall his usual sharp reason.

He would leave this stricken post, he and Lois, at once. Once away in the forest and they would be safe. There the sun could not reach them in its ferocity and the big streams were yet sweet and running. Ever since the news that the fever had come had spread over the settlement he had battled with this desire, but now with the first death he had succumbed.

He would tell Lois that they must go at once.

He found her this evening sitting on the log that served as step to the cabin, her elbows on her knees and her eyes frowning out across the post and the dark rim of the forest across the lilac sky. Old Jaques had gone to sleep within like a very young child that grows drowsy as night comes. It was still breathlessly warm, with no breeze, and the silence seemed dry.

Over in her cabin Marie Mercier was crying

drearily, the regular long rhythm of her sobs sounding distinctly with an itinerant, hopeless sadness.

Sylvestor felt as if his nerves were wound up tight.

He laughed a forced thin laugh that neither deceived the girl on the step nor himself, as he approached.

Lois rose to place him a chair, but he waved her back and sat down on the log beside her.

She fell back into her position silently. They sat so, without speech, while the twilight deepened and the swift night fell. Over beyond the palisades the night bird had begun to call.

Presently the man laid his soft hand on Lois' arm.

She did not move, still gazing into the shadows.

"Lois," he said, "I have come to ask a great favour of you to-night. Will you grant it, my beloved?" He leaned nearer with that persuasive manner that he knew so well, only now he was unconscious of it, for once in his life, when it concerned a woman, wholly and desperately in earnest.

He loved this girl with a passion that racked him,—as passion of his own instilling had racked many a woman for his careless sake in days gone by.

"Will you?" he whispered.

"Yes, M'sieu," said Lois quietly, "if I can."

There was nothing in the words themselves, but they sent a chill through Sylvestor's heart.

"What is it that I can grant, M'sieu?"

"This, beloved," the man's voice shook with a genuine affection as he spoke the beautiful and stately word which so well suited this maid of the wilderness, "this,—come away with me at once from this stricken place. I know the priest is not here to marry us, but Le Roc can say a service over us, taking witness of our promise, and we can find the Father at Henriette once we arrive. Or,——" He hesitated a moment and Lois caught the pause.

"Or what, M'sieu?"

"Or we can take your father with us as guard for the eyes of the world."

This last came hard from Sylvestor. Old Jaques had been a question with him on that trip down the long trail. He had seen it stretch out before him, a glory of love, of unreal reality, a dream of an earthly heaven with the romance of the mighty forest behind and around and before, when they two, together and alone, should go through the silent places, building their fires afar from human kind, dreaming their dreams under the stars, following the dim trails as if they were

alone upon the earth with no eye upon them and nothing to mar the perfect days.

The thought of the querulous old man had sickened him from the first.

The whole plan of his thoughts lay plain beneath his words.

He could not see in the dark the narrowing of her lids, nor the set of her lips. When she spoke her voice had not changed.

"No, M'sieu, this that you ask I cannot grant."

"But why, Lois?" he cried, aghast, "in Heaven's name, why?"

"Why? For—many reasons," she answered, and was silent under the torrent of his words poured out of his heart so filled with fears and pulling desires.

"I will marry you, M'sieu, yes, as I promised, but I will not run from the Sickness in Fort Lu Cerne,—to save myself."

Far into the night this man sat on the log step of old Le Moyne's cabin and pled with all the eloquence he could command, but he won no other answer than that he had received.

When at last he rose to go he felt a weariness in all his being, a strange finality, as if this girl had put the seal of Fate upon his life, for he knew that where she stayed, there he would remain, even though death lurked in the tarrying.

"Will you kiss me once, Lois, of your own will?" he asked, standing before her with his feverish hand on her shoulder. Something of his accustomed arrogance was abated. It was with a new deference that he asked the question.

Lois had never kissed a man in her life.

When she was very little, crying in old Jaques' arms on a long foot journey from some place she did not remember, her father had petted her, coaxing the child to caress him in turn, but the baby lips had pulled away and they had been inviolate ever since.

Now in the dark, with the sound of poor Marie's grief for the man she had loved in her ears, the girl leaned forward and kissed Sylvestor on the lips.

He turned sharply away and disappeared in the night and the whole soul of him was shaken to its shallow depths with that calm, cool touch.

He dared not remain longer nor speak a word of good-night. He could not trust his trembling tongue.

As for Lois herself, when he had gone she again sat down upon the step and, turning her head, rubbed her lips hard against her shoulder. The palms of her hands, too, she instinctively cleansed with the leaves of the poor little golden trailer,—pitiable reminder of Pierre Vernaise,

her good friend,—whose slender length dropped wearily against the logs, its bravery of velvet bells withered and scorched by the heat.

For a long time Lois sat there, giving her mind to the thoughts that passed in a marching line across it, and dominant among them was ever that of McConnel.

She saw him the night before her imprisonment, strong silent man, passing back and forth among his people, stern, unreadable as herself in his own way, self-reliant, just, a figure to arrest the notice, and of that time the memory did not sting.

She saw a picture, too, that none but herself in Fort Lu Cerne had ever seen, and at its beholding the crimson flush rose dully to stain her face in the darkness.

Again she saw his face and the furious sparkle of his eyes as he caught her arm that night in the big room of Headquarters, felt his brute force as he dragged her out the door, across the open space and down the main way of the road to where the group of men talked by the stockade wall,—felt it again when he threw her into the guard-house, and even now, after all the months that had passed from that early night in the young spring to this in the heart of the summer, there rose in her throat the choking sense of fury, the blind rage that had held her that terrible night. The

fingers lying loose in her lap curled again in its grip.

She felt once more the presence of the two men at the guardhouse window, heard the Factor's voice and she startled,

"Good Lord!—A woman!" of Sylvestor's ejaculation.

She saw the face of the new man, read its depth and character, and again she saw stretched out before her the quick-laid plan whose consummation sat this very night in the echoing hollowness of the blockhouse upon the face of McConnel,—a haggard face whose every line said Failure as plainly as a written page, Failure that bit so deep into the slow soul of him that its scars would stand out livid and sore so long as life lasted.

This picture it was which brought peace and healing to the heart of Lois Le Moyne. In its contemplation she took pay for the unutterable abasement of that time in the guardhouse.

She saw McConnel, no longer the Factor of Lu Cerne save in his stubborn holding on until Sylvestor should be duly authorised by other word than his own, publicly cast out from the post whose winning had been the acme of his life's ambition, suddenly shifted under the load that she had borne, branded, disgraced, sent out to his old life in the wilderness as a common trapper,—and

behind it all the thing in her own heart that he had awakened himself.

The rare smile played around the girl's lips, but in her frowning eyes there lay a shadow of weariness.

And lastly she saw one more picture,—Sylvestor, the man to whom she had given herself.

Presently she rose and went in, stopping by the bed where old Jaques lay, to listen if the old man breathed aright.

With a gentle touch she slid the window yet wider open that any breath of air there might be astir should give him of its cooling.

As Fort Lu Cerne arose to another day it looked its neighbour in the face half fearfully, asking an unspoken question and sighing with relief when the answer was a clear countenance.

No one knew where the Thing, hovering like something alive in the golden sunlight above the settlement, would lay its finger next.

Mothers watched their children covertly, forbore to scold and snatched them up for sudden caresses, young men sped the words of love upon their lips to the maids they chose, and old men touched the withered fingers of their wives with tenderness, for none knew who would answer next to the irresistible call.

"All well with you?" asked Palo Le Roc of France Thebau.

"So far," was the answer, given in a guarded voice, as if he feared the Power might overhear.

"And you, Corlier?"

"Aye."

"At your house, Marc?"

"May the good God receive praise,—yet, M'sieu."

So the roll call went around.

That day was one of odd quiet above a strain of anxiety.

They talked in low voices and visited back and forth among the cabins, the older people recalling that other time of the pestilence and those who had gone out on the long journey then.

The women passed pityingly in and out of the lonely cabin of Marie, with its empty white bed in the corner, saying the tender useless things that women say to each other in such a time. Little Jaqua huddled beside her friend with a show of sympathy that was new to her. Of late a different look had been growing on the girl's piquant face, a seeming of awakening womanhood with its sweet gravity, its wider view of the things of life, its capacity for suffering.

Love was making of the little maid a woman.

Before the sun went down a white-faced man

came running from the southern side of the settlement, flinging up his hands and shouting:

“My little ones! Two! Mary Mother! The two of them at once!”

The scourge was beginning its work.

The two children of the voyageur had fallen ill simultaneously. One a fair-haired girl of four, already lay helpless in the stupor that portended the long fight, the other, a little fellow just big enough to crawl, was bright eyed with the raging fever which would quickly wear the tiny body out.

Fort Lu Cerne went to work at its apprenticeship to Death.

In two days they laid the baby next to Big Jean in the shadow of the church, and before the little girl gave up the struggle the touch had fallen in three other homes.

Here and there it made its choice, without reason or uniformity, striking one down with a sudden blow, torturing the hard fighting life out of another like slow fire.

Death and the shadow of death began to hang black and awful over the post.

Indefatigable in the struggle was Palo Le Roc. Weak and ailing herself, Tessa bade him go each day among those who needed his calm strength and the support of his unfailing courage. Early

he had sent a courier to the west in search of the camps of the Crees, that they might send a doctress, and every night he watched anxiously the big gate for sign of an arrival.

But day followed day and no one came.

CHAPTER XV

DEATH AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH

FIVE new mounds blistered staringly beside those others which the pitying hand of Time had smoothed and softened into mild sightliness.

The flowers in the few gardens of the fort begged timidly for rain from the hard blue sky and, failing of an answer, hung their pretty heads, drooped helplessly a day or two and died, hanging on their withered and dried stalks like bodies crucified.

The water in the well by the gate sank a foot from its accustomed line.

There was no breath of air and the heat became unbearable, beating down upon the cabins from a brassy sky that seemed remote and inaccessible.

From all over Fort Lu Cerne prayers thronged up to it like a flight of doves by night and day. Candles burned in every home beneath a crucifix or a picture of the Madonna and the beads of the rosary clicked constantly in one hand or another.

Lips trembled and eyes fell into the sad habit of filling suddenly, to be lightened by a brave

smile. Pitiful days they were that glowed and departed above the palisade.

One by one they dropped beneath the Sickness, the people of Fort Lu Cerne, until in every other house there was either a filled bed or a sadly empty one.

From cabin to cabin went tirelessly Marcel Roque, her hearty voice and sturdy kindliness easing the load on many a shoulder, and none knew, save only her husband, Eustace, and Lois Le Moyne that underneath her outside bravery her heart shook with terror.

The wizened little boy continued to play his quiet games on the doorstep or in the shade of the cabin as if no danger were anywhere in the world.

"It is the hand of le bon Dieu," whispered the mother, "in no other manner would he be spared so long."

Palo Le Roc, big, splendid man, clear seeing, kindly, was a pillar of strength to his neighbours. By day and night he stood by death to ease the struggle and leaned his shoulder under the burden of the bereft.

As if he had been the good Father himself, they drew upon his resources, minding his words like children, feeling a greater safety if he was near.

Every hand was turned to the common good;

those who had shut their own into the sun-baked earth turning from the new graves to lend a touch of help to the next stricken ones. To a man they worked as one, save those three whose lives had become so sadly mixed together: McConnel, shut into the lonely emptiness of Headquarters, putting into the finest order all things wherewith he had had to do for the coming of his successor; Sylvestor watching himself jealously for symptoms, and Lois Le Moyne, whose sullen heart yearned over the monkey-faced old creature hobbling happily around in his bright habiliments. She petted him with hand and voice and eye, caring for his comfort, making the things he liked to eat, filling the stifling days with all the pleasantness she could. A premonition clutched at her soul, chilling it with fear,—she who feared nothing upon the earth or under it. This aged man was her one known weakness. She understood perfectly the cowardice of Marcel.

The passing of those others was nothing to her. She only went to the daily burials beneath the burning sun to please him. The solemn service was getting to be a hackneyed thing, the death song of Jaqua Bleaurot had fixed its incomprehensible Latin words in every heart and fear had lost its potency by reason of its commonness.

“Lois, *ma chère*,” said Marcel one day, “come

out among us an' lend of the help an' strength the good God have cause' you to have. See how young an' strong an' fine you are. They have need of you, those out there in those cabins,—*Mon Dieu!* such need! — an' of many more like you. There is need of the passing of cool water from the well every hour, an' there cannot be too many willing hands. *Palo* an' *Marc* an' old *Blanc* an' *Henri* an' *France* an' many others they move back and forth all day an' still they call from the cabins. Will you come, *Lois*?"

Marcel put her hand on the girl's arm and her kindly eyes that saw so far in the reality of life begged of this strange nature its best.

Lois shook her head.

"For you, *Marcel*," she said firmly, "anything. For those others, nothing. An eye for an eye."

Marcel dropped her hand, sighed and walked away to her work of mercy.

"Now what, *Marcel Roque*?" said one of the women she had scourged by the well that day, and who had witnessed this scene.

Her eyes were full of tears and she raised her head, ready to fight.

"Still is *Lois* above you all," she cried, "even in her hardness!"

Lois, hearing the words of the raised voice, turned into the cabin.

“Rare Marcel!” she said gently.

Slowly, hotly, they pulled themselves by—the days. Despair sat, white faced and grim, at every turning, to be thrust aside by work that grew with the passing hours, grew in volume and difficulty and in its unceasing demands. One by one they buried their dead, and presently it came to be by twos and threes, and twice in the day,—those who had died in the night going to swell the account beside the church in the morning, and those of the day being laid to sleep in the dusk.

Palo Le Roc had caused the church to be opened and the tall candles burned on the altar without ceasing. Jaqua Bleaurot tended them and many tears fell on the rude rail of the chancel as the little maid prayed for the life and soul of one far away on the uncertain trails,—one whose merry face was sad for love of another.

“Mother of Mercy!” whimpered Netta Baupre, her hands trembling and her young face full of the fear of death, “we shall all die and there will be none to bury the last! We are forsaken of God!”

“Hush!” said Marcel sharply, who was holding in her arms a little girl whose tiny life was ebbing, “if you cannot be of service, Netta, it is of a certainty that you shall hold that clacking

tongue. Go out of the post if you mus' talk. The nerves here are drawn tight already."

Which rebuke was given to more than one out of the depth of Marcel's good sense.

"If only Father Tenau were come!" sighed Marie Mercier, whose grief was old and laid away that she might serve with the rest.

"Aye," returned Marcel, "but since he is not, we must do the best. The good God knows our plight, an' the heart made clean of itself will be welcome in His sight."

"I know,—but oh, the pity!"

"Aye! Do you think I cannot feel, Marie? My heart is sore, sore in the breast of me."

"The strong ones, it is hard to watch them die, —but the weak ones, like —like —Jean——" Marie's voice broke and she turned to dip a cloth in cooling water for the burning brow of the child, "And the little ones,—the children! Oh, Marcel!" A sob finished the sentence.

Marcel raised her face, twitching in every muscle.

"Marie, you must stop the talk," she said quietly, "if we must we must, but now we are at work."

The words were spoken like herself, but the cowering fear was in her eyes.

She told herself savagely that the little Solierre

was playing in the cabin's shade as she had left him, secure in his immunity from the common ill.

Marie dried her tears from her eyes and started on her way to another cabin near the northern wall.

"Bring the rest of the black herb tea, Marcel, when you come," she said, and her voice was once more steady, filled with the business of mercy.

By sundown the little girl needed Marcel no more.

She went at once from the dead to the dying, stopping on her way to snatch up her child for a hasty kiss and to give an injunction to Eustace as to the feeding and putting him to sleep.

She was hastening swiftly in the quick-falling dusk when Palo Le Roc met her face to face.

He stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Marcel," he said simply, with a tremour of feeling in his deep-throated voice, "you are my help. It is because you have the great regard, the love in your heart of humanity, that you are so strong. Without you it would be worse, how much I cannot say. It is of the need indeed,—the strong soul. You an' I,—we hol' them all from flying at loose ends. We stand in the place of Father Tenau. We must stan' together, Marcel."

The quick tears sprang to the woman's eyes.

She caught his hand in both her own with the rush of feeling. Only Palo had seen the strain which underlay her calm strength.

"We will," she said bravely and hastened on with new power surging in her tired body.

In this home she found a situation that tore at her heart again.

For five days death had taken toll from this one family.

First the trapper himself had gone, swiftly and quietly, then the wife, who had lingered for a week, being ill when her husband was in full strength, such was the whim of the Terror riding its whooping way across the post, and one by one the four children had followed. This was the last day and the last soul of the family,—a boy of ten. He was beyond need, too.

Marcel felt of the little head, already cool and damp, and sadly shaded the candle from the darkened eyes. There was nothing to do but wait.

She sat down on the step of the door and leaned her head against the jamb.

The relaxation was as a draught of water to one dying of thirst. Only herself knew how she was wearing her body out in this ceaseless service.

Yet she thanked her Creator that it was permitted for her hands to do so much to ease the pitiful going of those who went the long way.

It was the first quiet hour she had had for days wherein she might think undisturbed, and she gave herself up to her thoughts, but it was characteristic of the secret fear that mastered her that the child was not permitted to enter into them. Instead they fastened themselves in a weary sadness around Lois Le Moyne and for the first time deep in her heart Marcel felt a stab of pain because of her. She loved the girl with a loyal love and her cold sternness that would not forgive nor overlook in the shadow of death was to this loving woman a terrible thing. She was weary and sad and fearful,—though beneath it, in the good foundation of her nature the new strength that had been borne with Palo Le Roc's words sent its diffusing glow throughout her body,—and the hot darkness of the stricken post weighed upon her soul like lead. She wondered about many things as she sat there, quiet, resting, waiting for the grim foe to finish its work in the dim cabin behind her.

Suddenly she started upright, gripping the door lintel.

Out upon the still night air a voice lifted itself, strong,—so strong that its clear, electric cry reached every corner of the settlement,—a voice charged with something that lifted her to her feet, drew her toward it, would have drawn her from

the ends of the earth, it seemed to her, in that first moment.

"Marcel!" it pealed, loud and clear, like a startled bell, "Marcel! Marcel! Marcel!"

It was the voice of Lois Le Moyne.

It penetrated every house in the post, reaching the farthest nook, searching every place. Marcel started, running.

"Lois!" she cried, "I'm coming, Lois!"

"Marcel! Marcel!" called the voice, compelling, pulling, urging, "Marcel!"

Down the main way flew the object of that lifting call. Something in its peculiar quality drew taut the strings of her heart, flashed before her a gleam of awful things, as when the earth breaks forth in fire and wrath and fury, to form, æons hence, new fields and fairer scenes.

"Marcel!"

On the step of the cabin stood the girl, her head thrown back like a baying hound's, her full throat swelling to the volume of her cry, the light from the candles behind her falling weirdly on her black head and the long braid hanging to her knees.

In many a cabin the hearers shivered and crossed themselves. There was something so wild and savage, so alien and unknown, in that terrible call.

Marcel flung herself into the circle of light.

Lois caught her by the shoulders and her fingers bit deep into the flesh. Her slow black eyes were red with fire in the shadow.

"My father," she cried, "my father, Marcel Roque! My father!"

Choking with the grip of reflected passion that keyed the very atmosphere to the sudden apex of some mighty thing about to happen, Marcel tore loose and pushed past the girl into the cabin.

She stopped, swiftly and still, in the centre of the floor.

Half out of his bed, his wrinkled face twisted in the dim light, his thin old body contorted with a sudden great struggle, Old Jaques faced them for the last time.

Here the touch had been of appalling swiftness. Marcel looked a moment, then she turned to Lois.

Her eyes wide and staring, her lips tight shut, her hands clenched at her sides, half crouched against the open door, Lois Le Moyne looked past her friend at her father,—the one thing she had ever loved with tenderness. The breath was stopped in her throat, an unutterable agony covered her pale features.

Marcel, ever wise in her simplicity, did not move or speak for many minutes. She, too, held her breath and they stood so in the unearthly quiet,

watching, one woman the unlovely thing on the side of the bed, the other her.

What passed in the heart of the girl in those awful moments the woman could not guess. Mighty, appalling, it must have been, the upsurge of the rebellion, when this contained, sufficient, dominant nature felt the touch of that Omnipotent Power whose decrees are final, not to be questioned or resisted. Something of this shone forth across the speaking face, for once bereft of its hauteur, slipped free of its habitual calm.

Presently there was the soft slip of a step at the door. The neighbours had come to the new house of death.

Lois heard it, as did Marcel. With a sucking gurgle the arrested breath swept in over the shut lips, the eyelids flickered from their wide strain and the girl straightened her body along the door. Her eyes turned at last to the bed. She put up a hand and pushed the hair back from her low brow. With the motion she returned from that place wherein her soul had crouched in its moment of bereavement,—and a far place it had been, Marcel knew.

She turned to her friend.

“Keep them out, Marcel,” she whispered, “keep them out.”

And Marcel gently closed the door in the faces of those who had come to help.

Slowly, a step at a time, separated by long intervals of motionless silence, old Jaques' daughter approached him where he lay in his pitiful helplessness.

She covered the last stretch with a rush and threw herself against his inanimate form, gathering it close in her young arms as a mother might a child, and began speaking to it in a strange tongue, the liquid words of which were unfamiliar to Marcel. Back and forth Lois rocked her father's body, catching her breath in breaking sobs, but on her face there was no sign of tears.

Presently Marcel crept up and gently touched her shoulder.

"Come, Lois," she ventured softly.

The girl did not seem to hear.

"Lois."

"Lois dear,——"

Only the dry sobs and the hot silence.

"Please, Lois,"—there were tears on Marcel's cheeks and in her tender voice. She pulled loose one of the girl's arms in an attempt to lift the body to the bed.

Then, indeed, Lois heard and answered.

With a bound she leaped to her feet, caught

Marcel and threw her across the room. She settled back to her position by the bed.

Marcel turned to the door, laid her arm against it and her face in her arm and gave way to the grief of her tired body and her hurt soul.

It was the best thing she could have done.

The sound of her weeping penetrated the haze of passionate anguish which encircled the girl, penetrated as with a sharp point through the mist that obscured her vision and her hearing, shaking her together and to a realisation of things as nothing else could have done. She raised her haggard face and looked back at Marcel, drooping against the door, across her shoulder.

"Marcel," she said dully, "forgive me, Marcel."

But the woman, worn to a thin edge of endurance, wept.

CHAPTER XVI

“LIKE AS A FATHER”

How long Marcel wept with her face against the wall she did not know. She felt as if the world had fallen from beneath her feet, she who had hung so desperately to the things of life in the midst of all the death of the past days, and the terrible yearning for tears that had stuck in her throat throughout now mastered her. It was for everything of pity in the post, herself included, that the weary tears flowed and most of all for the wizened child that was not even sick as yet. The savage fling of this girl whom she had loved and fought for but served to break the last thread of self-control by its personal touch.

She cried in an abandon of misery, as only a strong woman, defeated by her own tenderness of soul, can cry. She gave herself up to it, wholly, unreservedly, making no effort to hold back, and her sore heart poured forth its pain.

After a while, a long, long while, when there was no sound in the cabin save her own sad wailing, there fell on her shoulder a touch, infinitely

gentle, strangely new. So new and unfamiliar that Marcel started and raised her swollen face.

Lois stood beside her, her features themselves again save for the eyes which spoke a language of suffering such as even Marcel, accustomed to the grief of death, could not read.

"Come, Marcel," she said quietly, "help me."

On the bed Old Jaques lay in peaceful length, his claw-like hands already folded on his silent breast.

"Candles from the shelves there, ten of them, — in the long box. A white sheet from the chest in the corner." The words of direction fell with her old calmness as the girl took up a pail, filled a kettle on a crane and built a fire beneath it.

Without comment Marcel, good friend that she was, turned to the tasks before them, stifling the sobs to longer and longer intervals.

In the shut cabin, hot to suffocation by reason of the fire, these two women performed the intimate service for the dead,—laved the body, dressed it in the brightest and gayest of the clothing the little old man had loved, a buckskin shirt whose whole front was one beautiful plastron of beadwork, fashioned in the intricate and unique designs that only the fingers of his child could make, and which no one ever seeing could fail to know as the sign manual of Lois Le Moyne, a gorgeous sash of

rainbow silk, and lower garments of fringed buckskin as white and soft as a lady's hand.

The hard, hot light of the coming day saw the cabin in spotless order, a straight high bier made of the table and two boards draped in white sheets, whereon rested in imposing state the tiny form of the old trapper, and at its head and feet and sides tall candles burning steadily. On the resplendent breast lay the black iron crucifix and glistening in the scant white hair the sprinkled drops of the blessed water from the vial that the good Father had left on his last trip.

At the doorstep Lois stood as Marcel made ready to leave.

With a sudden motion the girl took the woman's face between her hands and looked deep into her eyes.

"I cannot speak, Marcel," she said, "but you know. Now, I want to see none to-day. After dark this night I will—will put him away." There was a short catch in the voice. "You I would like to have near."

Tired and weary, yet beginning to feel a lift of something that was near to hope, Marcel Roque went home to her own cabin.

All day the house of the Le Moynes stood shut and silent in the blistering sun. Hushed words passed among those who could yet think of other

things than their own griefs, and many were the wondering glances that went its way.

By ten of the clock on that morning Sylvester in his light clothes and shining with cleanliness made his way down the main way from the Corlier abode and tapped at the closed door. There was no sound from within and his knock was not answered.

As he was turning away with an unmistakable relief in his heart, a stir of arrival came from the gate of the post.

Two objects of interest were entering Fort Lu Cerne,—a slim youth whose handsome face had become refined by mental suffering, and at his side a bent and withered crone. She was a woman of the Crees. Across her breast hung uncounted rows of polished elk teeth, a fringed tunic of smoked buckskin draped her birdlike form, while on her feet sparkled small moccasins profusely ornamented with shining coloured quills of the porcupine.

From the other end of the settlement Palo Le Roc, going from some task to another, saw them and a prayer of thanksgiving burst audibly from his lips.

He hurried down to meet them.

"Hola, Pierre Vernaise," he called, "did Pete Gabrielle find you?"

"Pete Gabrielle? No,—I have seen no one from Fort Lu Cerne since I am away, Palo."

They had met and stopped together, with the old woman standing silent and those who had seen the coming gathering eagerly around, some already besetting Pierre for the skill of the wrinkled squaw.

"Be still," commanded Le Roc.

"You did not? So? Then how did you know to bring the doctress of the Crees, Pierre?"

Pierre turned his eyes away and looked up the hot road. They fell upon Sylvestor just leaving the home of Lois. A wimple of pain passed over his expressive face.

"Something told me she was needed," he replied, "I knew the Sickness had fallen by — by what I know not, yet I knew it had fallen."

Palo looked soberly into the young man's countenance and what he read there was good, for he suddenly put out his hand.

"One more worker added to us, M'sieu Vernaise," he said simply, "an' gift of God, the doctress!"

As they turned back up the open lane between the habitations, Pierre touched Palo on the arm. His dark eyes begged eagerly.

"Lois?" he asked in a low voice.

"She sits alone in the cabin there. Old Jaques

went out at dusk last night, yet she has not had him laid away, nor will she see any of the settlement save Marcel Roque. What she means to do is known only to *le bon Dieu*." The speaker did not see the light of ineffable joy that flowed over the features of the youth.

He knew now that Lois had not as yet gone with Sylvestor, but at its heels came the other thought,—she was still within the stricken post.

What passed within that shut cabin all through the long hours of that hot day, none in Fort Lu Cerne ever knew. The door was closed, the windows covered and the strange girl alone with her dead.

Dusk fell and the stars came brightly out on the dark sky, and Marcel Roque hovered uncertainly out in the warm darkness. There was no moon and no breath of air stirring. In three cabins death lay and in five more it hung, waiting, and the weird light of the burning candles made tremulous earth-stars of the small windows and the open doors.

An odd seeming of expectancy and mystery pervaded the sad settlement.

At last as Marcel waited patiently the door of this cabin opened and against the shadows of the unlighted interior the form of Lois loomed dim in the doorway.

She peered out in the night.

"I am here, Lois," said the older woman softly.

"Then wait."

She turned back and Marcel stood wonderingly alone.

Presently there was a little sound from the room, a swish and sigh of moving cloth and the creak of a board, and a long white wedge came end on out of the door, then the form of the girl beneath and a smothered word escaped Marcel.

She was carrying in her arms the corpse of her father.

"Holy Mother!" whispered Marcel, "Lois, what do you do!"

"Bring the pick and shovel from the corner there, Marcel, and follow," she said across her burden.

"Yes, but,—but how can you,—oh, Lois." Marcel went for the tools and fell in behind.

They turned slowly up the road toward the church, this strange procession, and their feet made no sound upon the dusty earth.

So went old Jaques, one-time trapper and adventurer in the strenuous ways of life, to his long rest, borne in the strong arms of the child he had raised, as a big child is borne in the arms of its father.

It was no heavy task for Lois Le Moyne. The little old body had long since lost its flesh and its weight of a man, toll of the extended years, and she carried it easily, one arm under the stiff shoulders and one over the stiff knees with the withered breast pressed savagely against her beating heart.

She spoke no word, nor did Marcel, as they passed up between the houses and finally came to the row of graves, now pitifully long, alas! beside the church, the ghostly radiance of whose altar candles glowed palely against the night.

Marcel hesitated at the end of the row.

"Not here," said Lois briefly.

She passed between the graves and the church and went toward the back of the structure,—between it and the stockade wall.

As they turned the corner Lois, in the lead, swerved sharply with a startled warning.

An open grave yawned at their feet,—a freshly dug grave, alone behind the church.

The girl stopped with lifted head, ready for conflict, fierce as a mother panther whose young is threatened. That lone place, away from the common mass, she had meant for her own dead,—her dead, whom no alien hand had desecrated in the last rites, whose sleeping place should be as sacredly apart as she could make it.

As she stood so, alert, for a moment, a figure emerged from the deeper shadow of the church.

It was Pierre Vernaise.

"M'amselle," he said timidly with a great catch in his voice, "Ma'amselle, forgive—you are not offend' that I should dig your father's grave? I wished to do something."

Lois stooped and gently, very gently, laid her burden upon the earth.

Then she went around the open hole and took both the hands of the youth in hers.

"Offend'?" she said, "in my utter poverty I am rich, M'sieu. I have three possessions in the world,—Marcel, this grave and that friendship which could so read my wish. I thank you, M'sieu Vernaise."

She turned to the grave and the body, tightly wrapped and sewed from head to foot in strong white sheets, for the rude coffins made of pine that were kept in store in the post had long since ceased to fill the demand, and dropping upon her knees beside it, she lifted her face to the star filled heavens. The two friends of this girl knelt softly where they stood, wondering, and presently, after a little silence, her voice lifted itself upon the air, low and clear, contained, calm, but filled with such unspeakable anguish as thrilled their hearts with its pain, and the words it spoke were the exalted

periods of the Latin service for the dead that none but an ordained priest should utter.

The calm effrontery of it sent a shiver through the devout heart of Marcel, while the man bowed his head under the magnificent beauty of the solemn ritual.

Where she had learned that service they did not know, nor by what right she dared use it, yet Pierre remembered, there under the stars, that morning in the spring and his own words, "Lois Le Moyne is beyond the law."

When she had finished, her voice dropping gently down to the close, she rose quietly and took from her belt a bundle that hung there. It was a brightly striped and heavy woollen blanket, inside of which was wrapped a small pillow.

In silence she put a hand on the grave edge, dropped down and carefully spread the blanket over the hard ground, folding it half back to one side and placing the little pillow at the head. Then she stood up.

"Now, Pierre, if you will lift my father down to me," she said.

Pierre Vernaise raised the little old form, slighter than ever in the stiffness of death, and laid it into her arms upheld to receive it.

It was a wide grave that Pierre had dug, and Lois had room to kneel and fix the pillow under

the old head, to fold over and tuck in carefully the heavy blanket, and to see that the tiny old man rested easily in his earthen bed. When this was done she stood up, reached a hand to Pierre on one side, Marcel on the other, and climbed out.

As Pierre took up the shovel she crouched on the edge.

"Lightly, M'sieu, and at the sides first," she said. "Lightly,—oh, fill it carefully, M'sieu!" The agony broke forth in the last word, but she was herself again in a moment. Without speech they stood, these three, in the hot silence, until the last shovelful had been heaped on the mound, the last clod laid. Then Lois turned away and passed out around the corner of the church without looking back. Two men with lanterns were busy at the farther end of the long row.

They walked in silence down the main way.

Presently, where the cabins began, the girl stopped.

"Marcel," she said, "I am ready. Give me half your tasks."

"Ready? What do you mean, Lois?"

The dark head raised itself with a swift motion.

"Send me to help," she said, "to work where it is the hardest."

Marcel touched her hand. It was stone cold and tight shut.

"Good! We go at once to the Le Blancs. Pierre, if you would see to the need in the cabin by the small gate.—Come, Lois.—Good-night, M'sieu."

So, at last, Lois Le Moyne surrendered up her strength and her pride to the people of Fort Lu Cerne.

CHAPTER XVII

ALIEN SERVICE

SHE followed Marcel into the stricken home of the Le Blancs, silent, unchanged to the casual eye, and her strong young hands took hold from that first moment.

“Not the waiting, Marcel,” she said firmly, “the work, the heavy work,—the cooking of food or the washing of clothes or the bringing of water. Put me at that at once. Let me go where it is needed most, the unceasing work.”

They looked at her with a sort of wonder, these people in whose homes she came without speech or explanation, and for a moment took their minds from their tragedies to contemplate the miracle.

That Lois Le Moyne, the cold, the uncaring, the lawless, should turn her hand to service of mercy was beyond belief. They watched her as she plunged into the work that was ever ready at all hours of day or night in nearly every cabin of the post, and shook their heads.

If the girl had been indifferent before, she made up for it now. Here at last her magnificent young strength gave itself full play. Gloomy and frown-

ing, her dark eyes hiding their own shadows, she entered in as only Marcel had known she could. From dawn to dusk she worked feverishly, going back to the empty cabin for a few hours' sleep, for she shortly refused to share Marcel's hospitality, emerging before the light to plunge again into the doing of the day.

And it was not for long that she was destined to serve.

Before many days it was she who began to command.

"That cabin by the gate, Marcel. Send a man to relieve the mother. You had better take the child, Solierre, and go out of the post for an hour. Go into the forest, far as you can. I will see to all until you return. You will do better when you come back." And Marcel, with a sigh, went. Or,—

"If you will take water and the clean sheets to the Couervals', Pierre." Or again,—

"M'sieu Le Roc, send the doctress to me within the hour."

And that sane and kindly giant, Palo Le Roc, thrilled with an honest joy, for he knew that he had got at last the strongest force in the settlement enrolled in the struggle, unless it be the deposed Factor, nursing his humiliation and bewilderment apart.

Gift of the Good God indeed, as Palo had said on the day of Pierre's arrival, was the bent and withered crone of the tribe of the Crees. From cabin to cabin she went, practising her strange rites, brewing her unknown herbs into liquors that, in one instance here and another there, began to arrest the hand of the dread Terror. They clamoured for her, almost tearing her from one bedside to carry her to another, and in their eagerness and need exhausting her store of roots and dried leaves which she had brought in the hood of her blanket. Within the week they despatched a messenger to the far camps of her people for a fresh supply, and hope, that had risen like a phœnix with the first good that she had done, sank down under the despair of the length of the journey before the messenger could return. Whose loved ones might not go out in the interim?

In the meantime Lois Le Moyne held speech with the Indian woman in her own tongue, though none in Fort Lu Cerne knew where the girl had learned it, and the two turned silently to work together as if with an understanding that passed over the rest.

Not alone now did Lois hold herself to the work of her hands in the serving.

Once Marcel found her holding down with her strong arms a young voyageur who raved in the

delirium, bathing his burning face with cool water from the well, whose supplying to her hand was the eager work of Pierre Vernaise, and Palo Le Roc came upon her at another time watching a woman who was deep in the unlifting shadow, and upon the lips of the girl were the solemn phrases of the service for the passing soul.

Palo, that night, shook his head in mystification and turned back noiselessly, leaving her to her own ways.

Those women who had talked the loudest now held their tongues, not from belief in her, but in readiness for any new development. They were for the time at sea. But who among them had ever had true bearings on the strange nature of this girl from the time Old Jaques had brought her to the post, a wee, unhappy child?

Marcel, strong, kindly Marcel, began to fall in behind, as was ever her way where Lois was concerned, deferring to the swift reason, the dominant coolness of the girl in the great work as she did in all things else.

They met one evening and walked down the main way together toward the gate of the post, gaping pitifully, it seemed to Marcel, as if trying to spew into the forest the thing within that sickened it, and the peace that lay upon the stricken scene was a mockery.

"You don' know, Lois," said Marcel gently, "how I love you for this, the fine work. It is proof of you to all those others."

Lois' brows drew down.

"Do you need proof, Marcel?" she asked.

The woman was filled with her mistake instantly.

"No! No! No! Lois! You know it is not the need,—not me! But those others,—they have talk' an' talk', an' I have fight an' fight when my heart was sore, an' now they can see what I have seen. You understan', Lois?"

The other smiled wearily, yet the leaping change had come into her eyes again.

"I understand, Marcel," she said.

They had stopped at the gate and Lois stood with folded arms looking away into the green heart of the wilderness that shut itself in their faces as if to hold its secrets jealously from the puny hands that searched at its edges.

The cruel sun had dropped reluctantly behind the western rim and the long lilac ribbons and streamers with their fringes of gold and copper shot across the heavens to where that dull haze hovered and quivered above the Red Hills to the north, and to where the twilight deepened to darkness toward the south. They fell silent, resting for a brief spell before the labours of the night. Never once had Lois mentioned her father, or

gone near the church since that night a week ago.

Yet now Marcel knew with the sensitive heart of the true friend that thought of him was tightening the lips beside her and drawing the brows into a deeper scowl.

"It is a great world," she said, quietly, after a while, "an' a great Heaven. We are so small creatures to creep through one up to the other, so small."

Lois did not answer and Marcel started. A figure was coming with a heavy step out of the forest way before them, betrayed by the dead leaves fallen too early, still wearing their green of summer. Presently it emerged into the faint lavender light, and it was McConnel.

He plodded slowly toward the gate and passed them by without a word, his handsome head bent and his hands clasped behind him after the manner of an old man.

There was something pathetic in his loneliness to Marcel.

Lois had not moved, eye or body, and presently she touched her hand, meaning to recall her back to the waiting work, and the touch startled her.

It was cold and clenched, that hand, as if some sudden emotion had drawn the warm blood from it, and instinctively Marcel turned and looked after the Factor.

It was to be long remembered by them both, that evening with its gold and lilac lights, its peace and its twilight. As they turned back into the post Marcel glanced toward her home where Eustace and the child made ready for sleep.

"Jesu mia, protect them!" she whispered.

They separated among the cabins, going each to a night of work, and each was busy with her own thoughts. As Lois passed on through the dusk Pierre Vernaise stepped from some shadow and joined her.

"If I may, Ma'amselle?" he asked, as he fell into step.

"Assuredly, Pierre," Lois said warmly, "you are very welcome to me. Your friendship is among my poor possessions, as I have told you."

A wistful pleasure lighted the dark eyes of the half-breed youth.

"So much is worth my life, Ma'amselle," he answered simply, and Lois' heart a stranger to joy since the early spring, thrilled with the truth that lay so plainly in the words. They walked on for a distance together, and presently when they reached the parting of their ways the girl with a sudden impulse held out her hand.

With his heart at his lips, Pierre took it between his own for a breathless moment.

“Ma’amselle,—Ma’amselle!” he whispered brokenly and turned away into the night.

All through the hours that followed, the girl’s mind was filled with restless memories. As she tended beside two beds in the same room she was far back in her childhood. Pictures long forgotten came before her constantly, pictures of her babyhood when she feared every strange face, of Old Jaques laughing at her stubborn shyness, of that long journey from some place she could not remember, the camps at night with the little fires and some wild thing calling from the forest. She remembered the yellow-haired wife of the wandering trader who had given her the book of bright pictures, and she recalled the first time her father had put into her hands a bag of beads, a needle, a string, and a piece of soft buckskin. She felt again the leap of some unknown instinct within her that sent her baby fingers deftly into the swift weaving of quaint designs and figures. She had never seen a bit of beadwork before, but she knew without words what to do with the materials. With such unceasing memories the night wore away, scattered through with the pitiful raving of a girl in one of the beds. It was a hot night, dark and still. As the first red of coming day tinged the east there was a step on the sill and France Thebau came hurriedly out of the darkness.

"Ma'amselle Le Moyne," he whispered excitedly, "come at once. They are carrying home Marcel Roque from the north wall."

Lois whirled upon him.

"*What!*" she cried fiercely.

"Aye! The good woman. At last she has pay the price. An' more, Ma'amselle,— This morn' Eustace, he have not arise. It has strike them both at once."

As Marcel had come to her that night of her bereavement, swiftly, leaving all else, so now she went to her, running through the breaking day and a terrible fear clutched her soul.

She bounded in at the door of the cabin like a young deer in the spring. The bright eyes of Marcel, her good friend, her more than friend, her champion and stay, burned up into her own with the brilliance of the raging fever.

A thrill of horror shook Lois. It would be the swift death then,— a matter of a day or two. On the bed behind her lay Eustace, locked in the stupor of the longer fight, and the girl's strange heart filled with anger toward him that he was to have the few days' longer lease on life.

She stopped by the bed and Marcel reached for her hand.

"Don't, *ma chère*," she whispered, "don't look so. It is only the common destiny. Am I

more than those others, or Eustace,—or——” The brilliant eyes turned to where the child lay asleep on the pallet on the floor. Marcel did not finish. She could not bring herself to name her idol.

Lois stood beside the bed in the lightening day and her lips were dumb and her mind blank.

Without a word to Marcel she turned to those worn workers who rallied at call of the Sickness as they had rallied from the beginning, only their ranks were thinner now, and within her eyes began to glow the fire that ever lighted at the breath of battle.

“Send me the doctress, France Thebau,” she said sharply.

With an assumption of authority that sat well on her young shoulders the girl at once cleared the cabin of all save herself and Palo Le Roc, who would not go, and put all within to rights while she waited.

Presently she came, that old and wrinkled doctress, came with a small iron pot in her hands which contained the last of her healing brew. Already three pale shadows were creeping back to the sunlight of life from the valley of the shadow as a result of her uncanny craft and two more were past the line of danger.

Lois clutched her and looked into the pot, from

which rose a heavy sickening odour. It was barely half full. She launched at the Indian woman a volley of words in her own tongue, receiving her answers in stoical monosyllables, and after a while Lois nodded acquiescence. Anxiously Marcel from the bed watched.

The squaw built a tiny fire on the hearth and carefully heated her decoction. An odd, hard light flickered in the deep eyes of the girl. It was to be a battle for her friend, and she meant that it should be won.

At last the doctress poured the stuff into an earthen cup to cool a bit. The peculiar fumes made the small cabin stifling, even in the lesser heat of the yet unborn day.

"Marcel," said Lois firmly, "you must drink this all. It is your one chance." She put an arm under the woman's shoulders and raised her up, but at that word Lois had made her first mistake. Marcel lifted her eyes to her face and a quick anxiety diffused itself across her features.

What she read there made her look keenly at the inscrutable face of the doctress.

"Lois," she said swiftly, "Lois — is there more of this brew?"

Lois frowned and shifted her eyes to the Indian.

"Tell me," insisted Marcel between her hot breaths.

Then Lois looked her straight in the eyes and answered.

"No," she said, "no,—but by the God of Heaven you drink it to the last drop!"

She slipped her arm around Marcel's neck, nodded to the doctress, who sprang to her help, and held the cup to the parched lips. Marcel fought feebly, feeble already, so swift was the working of the scourge, and tried to push it away.

"Eustace!" she cried pitiably, "my husband!"

"*Solierre!*" rapped Lois, sharp as a snapping wire, "your child! Who will care for a crippled child without his mother?" and poured the hot liquid gurgling down the woman's throat.

Then she stood up, pale but undaunted, while Marcel fell back on the bed, turned to the unconscious form of Eustace Roque and fell to weeping.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE REWARD OF FRIENDSHIP

SHE had taken a great chance, a great responsibility, and made a great decision, this Lois Le Moyne, whose life dealt only with the strenuous things.

When the doctress came, bringing the last of the saving brew within Fort Lu Cerne and which was like to be the last for many days, a great crisis opened up before her quick vision. There on that bed in the dawn-dim cabin lay two people, both marked for the hand of death, and it did not count that one was set in the depths of her unloving heart in that swift moment of decision. So much must be said of Lois, no matter what was to be said of her in other things. Instead her mind, stripped of its agony of fear for her one friend by the glare of that white light of responsibility, saw clearly all the future as affected by this crisis.

There lay Eustace, the father and breadwinner, unconscious, marked for the quiet death that creeps without an awakening, a good man in his quiet way and loved of his wife. His place, va-

cant, would show a sad want, yet of all those in Fort Lu Cerne none would miss him save only the woman who loved him.

Beside him lay that woman, not only the help and mainstay of the whole settlement with her simple wisdom, her great heart, and her unceasing kindness, but more,—ah, infinitely more,—the *mother* of the pitiable misshapen child on that pallet on the floor. And here in this iron pot was the mystic brew of the Crees which could give back life,—enough for one,—not enough for two. So Lois Le Moyne, in sacrificing one, thought for the good of the many.

It was no easy task she had set herself, that of caring for, to its consummation, the thing she had swerved her way.

For poor Eustace they did what they could, she and the doctress who stayed by her, and Palo, who gave of his time what could be spared from his other work, in easing the steady downward journey with cool water brought by the eager serving hands of Pierre; but for Marcel they buckled into such a battle as had not been fought in the post since the sickness began. By day and night they rolled her in blankets hung by the fire to heat, kept cool the burning brow and hot the hands and feet, fed her with gruels and forced down her reluctant throat the sustenance that she did not want.

Day by day slipped by. Lois was wan and tired, with deep circles under her dark eyes, and the Indian woman fell away to a more bird-like slightness yet. Once Sylvestor, passing by on the farther side of the road, paused and looked hungrily at Lois going in across the step with a pail in her hands. The young head raised itself a bit higher with a contempt that did not hide itself now, since there was none to see but the Cree woman and the child sitting forlornly in the shadow of the house. She did not turn her face nor speak to him, and the man went on with a real anguish in his coward's soul.

It had been on a Tuesday that the Roques had fallen into the shadow of the scourge, and on the morning of the Sunday following, Eustace slipped quietly down the last stretch whose end is peace, and Marcel opened her eyes to life.

And between the two where they had been placed apart, at that hour stood Lois Le Moyne, her white face hushed and calm with the calmness of that strength which had seen the best, done it, and waited without fear for the aftermath.

They carried Eustace to Marcel for her last good-bye, wrapped him in the white sheets, and Palo and Pierre carried him on their shoulders to one of the graves waiting at the end of the long row.

And it was in the dusk of that same night,

when the patient eyes of Marcel, sad beyond words, looked out of the shadows with an expression that wrung at last the heart of Lois with the feeling of tears, when the girl was tired from the long struggle, and the triumph she felt at Marcel's return was pale in the shadow of grief, that that last little one, the one for whose pitiful sake she had done what she had done, the small Solierre with the lovely face and the crooked shoulders, lay him down with his mother and closed his baby eyes in a weariness that told that yet once again the touch had fallen.

Weak Marcel looked long at the little face, raised her despairing eyes to Lois and whispered:

"Mere de Dieu! It is the end now."

But Lois shut her tired lips, squared her shoulders and was once more ready.

"No," she said steadily, "no."

The Indian woman had fallen into a deep sleep on the empty bed of Eustace, worn with her long serving of her white brothers. Lois went to her and awakened her with a heavy hand on her bony shoulder, a hand at once certain in its command and firm in its undaunted power.

"Come," she said in the Cree tongue, "come quick!" and as the dull eyes of the other opened they met again the white fire of battle in those that burned above them.

"Think of all you know, my sister," spoke the

girl, "the last that can be done for one in the Great Illness,—surely the knowledge of the Crees, so justly renowned among their brothers of the forest and the post, stops not with the herbs that have given out. Think,—is there not beyond?"

She stood back, holding the doctress with her burning eyes, driving the heavy sleep of weariness from the clouded brain beneath the coarse black hair with its red-stained parting by the very force of her own will, now surging up again as the need of battle rose. The old squaw sat up on the edge of the rude bed and blinked back at her. A white soul lived behind that brown, wrinkled face with its pathetic dulness, for this woman had patiently and without question come among the white people, exposing herself to death, and without hope of reward worked for them as if they were of blood kin,—the Crees were friends of the settlement, and that was a bond which demanded its redemption.

Now she looked vaguely at Lois and slowly shook her head.

"Nothing?" said the girl tensely, "will my sister fail at last?"

"If it be the child," she said hesitatingly, her deep gutturals filling the silence,—

"Aye!" said Lois eagerly.

"One thing there remains. It is decreed by the

Great Spirit that when a child lies down with the Sickness, if there is one, strong in the strength of health over whose head the Spirit of Sickness has passed without descending, who is willing to give of his blood to liven the little veins, the child will, — sometimes, — be spared.”

She ceased, looking toward the bed where the stricken eyes of the mother agonised above her child, unconscious of the portent of the words whose syllables she did not understand.

They had spoken throughout in the Indian tongue.

Without a moment's hesitation the girl caught up the hope.

“My sister speaks well. Here am I, of full strength, and yonder is the child.”

The woman nodded and went immediately about her preparations, the sleep hardly gone from her eyes.

She took from her legging a dirk-like hunting knife, felt its edge with a withered finger, and laid it on the pine table. Then she went out the door and around the cabin to where Marcel's little garden stood in pitiable transfixion of stiff dryness, its giant red flagon flowers dead on their stalks, its straw flowers bleached on their hollow stems. It was among the latter that she groped in the hot darkness, coming in again presently with an

assortment of the shining, delicate, tube-like straws. These she laid upon the table beside the knife, going to the hearth for her iron pot, which was added to the others, and then she turned to Lois. The sleeves of the girl's faded print dress were rolled to the elbows, exposing the round, white forearm, fine grained and muscular. Lois moved to the table with her back to the bed, and held out the hand which the doctress motioned for. It was a weird scene, with the candle-light dim and flickering, the cabin with the feel of death in it, the mother, turned to recovery, the child turned into the way of death on that bed in the corner, the white girl with her blazing eyes and her calm face, the brown woman with her last strange hope of help. Upon it for a second's space Time paused. Then as the doctress took up the knife and reached for Lois' hand, the weak voice of Marcel, horror filled, shrieked from the corner.

"Lois!" she cried, "Lois!"

The Indian pulled the firm, strong hand forward until the wrist, upturned, was poised above the little iron pot, holding the fingers tight in her left, while with her right hand she poised for a moment the sharp point of the knife above a certain spot on the white skin, gauging to a nicety just where the warm blood of that courageous

heart pulsed nearest, and with a quick, sure stroke plunged it in. There was an instant red spurt that followed the steel, the doctress dropped the knife, caught up the pot and deftly directed it into the vessel. The woman on the bed, shuddering in her weakness, counted the spurts that tinkled, each, like dropping water.

It seemed hours to Marcel, hours of horror, while that little tinkle dripped into the pot, each dropping spurt sounding duller as the unoccupied space in the vessel became less.

Then the doctress set the pot on the table, snatched from her beaded belt one of the buckskin thongs that always hung there, and bound it swiftly and with amazing tightness around the wrist above the incision. She turned from the girl, having finished with her, and picked the small body of the child from Marcel's nerveless arms. Again the mother shrieked, not knowing.

"Silence, Marcel," commanded Lois.

She sat down and took the unconscious boy in her lap.

The doctress returned to the table, assorted with critical fingers the hollow straws shining in their dry cleanliness, selected one, felt it, looked down its interior toward the candle, blew through it, and laid it close beside the pot from which arose a tiny steam. Then she came and took one

of the wizened wrists, the left, nearest the heart, drawing it toward her as Lois moved nearer the table and its burdens. Once again she raised the knife, and many a gowned physician of the civilised world might have envied the skill that this time sought out the tiny red-walled channel of life, raised between finger and thumb the fine blue vein, punctured it, covered the puncture with a bony thumb while she lifted the pot, filled her mouth with its contents, picked up the delicate straw, slipped the thumb from its incision, inserted her rude instrument, upward, applied her lips to the other end and sent slowly to the heart of the stricken child the warm blood of the magnificent young girl.

It was an operation not pleasant in the beholding, and it took many minutes, and when Lois Le Moyne at last arose to carry back to her friend her earthly idol, that good friend, the strong, the sturdy, the sensible Marcel, she had fainted for the first time in her life.

So Lois laid the child beside her and, turning, went out into the night.

As she did so a figure stepped silently from the open window and went away in the dark, a square, heavy figure, which walked heavily like an old man and the face that it bore was the face of McConnel, the deposed Factor of Fort Lu Cerne,

and the look in his steady eyes was one of greater bewilderment than had sat therein even in these past months when all his standards of life and living had failed him.

The heat of the night was enervating, stifling. There was no moon and the brilliant stars burned close to the stricken earth.

Lois walked around into the rustling dryness of the garden and stood there looking around at the familiar scene. Down the road but a little way was the one home she had ever known, silent, dark, its doors and windows closed, its whole air one of desertion. A heavy pain took sudden hold of her as she looked—the pain that during the work-filled days was crushed fiercely down within her—and wrung her to the very foundations of her being.

She saw plainly the twisted face of the pitiable old man as he lay that night half in and half out of the bunk bed. It filled her with such a flood of resentful anguish that the two deep lines drew in beside the hard held lips and added a touch of years to her face. The shadow of weariness in her eyes was deeper than ever before.

Many thoughts were passing through her brain, thoughts that were tangled like a web of silk, thoughts that had never entered there before and which demanded their hour of her.

The garden became suddenly unbearable. The dim light from the cabin window filled her with a horror of going back indoors. A panic began its eerie will within her and this girl whose high head had never bowed to anything during her whole life was suddenly filled with a wild terror which found its birth within her soul. It may have been due to the loss of that little iron pot full of the essence of life. At any rate it seized her and sent her out from among the dead flower stalks running, to tear down the silent stretch of the dust covered road toward the big gate, still standing pathetically open as if no foe would enter into the death ridden post. Out the gate, across the small cleared space without the stockade, into the trail and on into the black stillness of the deep forest she went, and for once in the span of her days fear sat on the face of old Le Moyne's daughter, fear that was vital and incomprehensible, coming from nothing tangible, and which sent her to the solitude of the great woods as instinctively as a death wound sends an animal to the same sanctuary.

With her hands clenched into fists that hugged themselves to her breast on either side the girl ran on and on, her feet as sure on the trail in the pitch darkness as any doe's, her eyes and mouth open, her face pale. After a while as she went on, her

flying steps loud on the heat killed leaves the only sound in the dense silence of the forest, the panic of unusual feelings began to leave her. The intangible horror of all creation and all death resolved into sanity and the simple and stern philosophy of her untutored life began to creep back to its throne. She checked her speed, loosened her shut hands and finally stopped, to stand breathing heavily in the stillness that fell instantly with her stoppage. The deep hush and the darkness laid its familiar hand upon her, calming her soul. She stood so a long time.

Then a little sigh heaved across her lips, the old weariness slid back into her eyes and she raised a hand and pushed the falling hair back from her brow.

The momentary madness had passed.

She raised her head with the old uplift and turned to go back along the trail. Already the judgment of strength which spared no one was beginning to flail her. A curl of contempt for her weakness lifted her lips.

She stopped suddenly and listened. A little sound was coming toward her from the direction of the post, the rustling of the fallen leaves under a hurrying foot.

As it came nearer she stepped, without sound herself, aside into the deeper protection of the

great boles. Presently a slim figure came swiftly down the trail, a graceful figure one would have known by the swinging spring of the step, and was hurrying by into the wilderness which stretched away to the ends of the world. A swift impulse took the girl in the shadow.

“Pierre,” she said distinctly.

The half-breed whirled and came to her.

“What is it, Ma’amselle, that have send you away, so, into the night an’ the great woods? It is some sadness that will not be still?”

There was a quiver in Pierre’s voice which he could not control. The depth of his worship gave up its faithful echo.

“Oh, Ma’amselle! If only I might be blessed of le bon Dieu that I might serve you with my life!”

The swift words poured over themselves on his tongue. The sensitive heart that had seen the unwonted in that flight of the girl, at all times so strong and contained, and sent him to follow could no longer contain itself.

He held out his two hands, quivering in the excess of the grand passion that swayed him, and his slender face was alight in the darkness with a worship as pure as Heaven.

It touched the girl with a quick knowledge. She reached out and took the groping hands. They

were fine-skinned and slim and they trembled greatly.

“Pierre,” she said with a new note in her voice, “Pierre, Pierre,— my good, good friend!” And in that moment a sorry yearning swept over her soul, a weary wish that mortals might do with the unrulable hearts in their breasts the things they would. In a tenderness that no living being had ever beheld in her she drew the youth toward her, and Pierre Vernaise, the light o’ love, the reckless, the overbold of other days, hesitated in an agony of unworthiness, held back from the Heaven of his dreams now that the woman he loved with his soul’s white fire drew him toward her in the darkness.

“If you but knew, Ma’amselle!” he cried sharply. “Ah! ——”

“I know, Pierre,” said Lois, “I know.”

Gently she drew him to her. With that strange tenderness which seemed alien to her and which might vanish at any moment, she loosened one hand and slipped it around the boyish shoulders on a level with her own, drawing the curly dark head of the youth down until it rested in the hollow of her throat.

The quick and glorious tears of an unworthy worshipper were in his eyes and Lois felt them drop softly against her flesh.

With their touch a change flashed over her face, a quick change as of a startled glimpse of depths and realities and heights that she had not known existed.

It clouded her eyes with shadows and saddened the set of her lips.

For a long time they stood so, these two, these strangely assorted two, each of whom the unknowable forces of life were slowly changing, one because of the other and love, one because of those very forces themselves, while far off toward the Pot-Hole country a panther screamed to the stars.

Presently Lois bent her head and laid her cheek caressingly against Pierre's tense face. Her fingers touched his hair with the motion of a mother's who soothes her child.

The boy straightened himself with a spring and laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Ma'amselle!" he cried brokenly, "I love you! Oh, I love you, Ma'amselle!" It was a man's full cry. A cry of mighty longing, of need and yearning and yet beneath it ran a note of despair that already felt its hopelessness.

"You are all of life an' earth an' Heaven to me,—yes, more than the good God himself! Oh, Ma'amselle!"

He dropped on his knees and catching her hands, laid them, palm outward, against his face.

The anguished sadness of renunciation was in even his passionate avowal. That sense which had made Pierre Vernaise bring the doctress to the post, now showed him the heart of Lois Le Moyne devoid of all love save that maternal tenderness which dared take him in her arms, and it lifted her yet higher on the column of his adoration even while it melted his soul in the furnace of suffering.

Lois stood before him looking down in the hot darkness and the yearning in his passionate cry found an echo in her weary heart.

"Dear Pierre!" she said softly, "good, good friend."

This was a stranger girl, this Lois, one whom none in Fort Lu Cerne had ever beheld, with the tenderness vibrant in her low voice and the light of appreciation in her eyes. She was living a wonderful moment in her detached life and it was to remain forever among that life's meagre treasures. She took a hand from his clasp and laid it upon his bowed head.

Something was stirring within her, another of the vague and alien emotions whose birth had troubled her in the past weeks.

"Chief among the few sweet memories of my life, M'sieu Vernaise, shall be the memory of this night," she said presently with simple dignity, "this love you give I shall hold and treasure forever. I

have never had its like before nor cared for it. Now it is to me precious as water to the drying streams.

"Pierre Vernaise,—dear Pierre Vernaise, if it were in my power to reward it with the great gift in return it would be my joy, but the heart in my breast, *ma chère*, is dead and dry as the sun-baked flats of the Ragged Lands."

Her voice was low and sad, weary as the eyes frowning above him, yet full of the sweetness of truth. Only this youth and the weak woman back in that cabin of all Lu Cerne had ever gone deep enough beneath the forbidding exterior of Lois Le Moyne to find the tiny trickle of her goodness.

"An' yet you are to marry this other, Ma'amselle!" he cried, lifting his drawn face. "Without a heart of love?"

"Aye! Without so much love as the tiniest fleck of dry dust on the path yonder!"

The youth caught his breath in a startled gasp.

"Then why? In the name of the good God, why, Ma'amselle?"

For a moment she hesitated. Then,—

"In payment of a debt I owe," she answered, "a debt whose making has been my season's work,—whose consummation has made life bearable these many months, even since the days when you brought me the golden trailer at the guardhouse

window. A debt I would pay with life itself, M'sieu." She ceased, having made justification as she would have done to none other living.

The tone was final and Pierre knew it, yet the pain in his heart was whelmed in a holy joy. He rose slowly and stood before her striving to see her face. And presently without consciousness he held out his arms and Lois leaned into his embrace, lifting her lips to his in the holy kiss of affection that is without alloy.

When Pierre lifted his head from that kiss the last atom of his old abandon was dead. The change was finished. He had lived his hour.

"Tell me," he said, "what I must do, Ma'amselle. I know now that my life must run apart from you, yet that life shall be perfect in your serving. Where shall I go, Ma'amselle, what shall I do that you would have? I would live till death as you would have me." The high calmness of the devotee spoke in his words. It stirred again that new emotion within the girl, yet it took a moment ere she yielded to the unaccustomed feeling.

"Then see, Pierre," she said at last, gently, "see. In her father's cabin lies little Jaqua Bleaurot, but newly fallen into the sickness and she whimpers and cries the name 'Pierre' by night and day. It is the great love that she has

and it eats her heart unto death. What better serving of one love, M'sieu, than the making perfect of another?"

Pierre bowed quietly.

"It is enough, Ma'amselle. I go at once to the Bleaurot cabin. Jaqua or another, I give my life where an' how you say. It is enough."

As by one consent they turned back along the trail to the settlement, and the right arm of the youth lay tenderly around Lois' shoulders while she held his hand in hers.

At the door of Marcel's cabin they parted silently, going back into the ceaseless work, and Lois stood a while alone in the night, thinking.

Twice in her immaculate life had she kissed a man, and neither was the kiss of love.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PERIL OF THE WILDERNESS

TO Angus McConnel, living his lonely life in the solitude of the deserted Headquarters, the days of the speeding summer were more unbearable than any knew. Deep in his stern nature a hidden vein of sympathy bled with each new touch of the Terror, every fresh mound beside the church, and though his face did not betray it and his tongue spoke no word of kindness to those who remained, he yet knew every vacancy in every family and where the touch fell last.

They paid no attention to him, the people of the post, save Palo Le Roc, who sometimes looked at him going his solitary way with a longing for his great strength in the struggle.

But it was more impossible for this man with his hidden sympathy to serve than it was for Lois Le Moyne, who had no sympathy.

He sat at his desk in the days and watched the men digging, in the early mornings, the graves that were very likely to be needed during the day and the small processions, usually two men with a burden on their shoulders, which saw to the last

resting place those who would wake no more, and often in the friendly darkness he walked among the graves with a grimness which hid that silent ache.

For three weeks the Sickness had worked its will with Fort Lu Cerne. There was scarce a cabin in the settlement where it had not taken toll and over half the populace lay in that row of graves, now lengthened and doubled into two.

The heat was amazing. The verdure was dead and dry, yet bearing its summer greenness, and the water in the well was appallingly low, with a bad smell. Surely it could not last much longer, else there would be, as Netta Baupre had said, none to bury the dead in Fort Lu Cerne. And Angus McConnel, who secretly sorrowed over these alien people who had been his and longed to help and heal them, went his lonely way as if uncaring because of his inheritance. He could not bend from his blood stiffness. Yet one thing he had done which no one knew. He had sent, long back at the beginning, a stray courier down the long trail to the mission monastery to the west of Henriette with word to Father Tenau, so long overdue among his distant people, and day by day he watched anxiously for the splendid priest who had grown white in the strenuous service of the wilderness, and his lean, dark-robed brothers of St. Francis,

as did Palo Le Roc for the return of his messenger from the camps of the Crees with the fresh supply of their peculiar herbs.

Only once had the two men, whose small human warfare had been swallowed up in the mighty tragedy of the settlement, met since that last tragic encounter.

On that hot night when McConnel, drawn by Marcel's cry of horror, turned away from the cabin window he looked into the face of Sylvestor, its thin length accentuated by the hollows of gaunt fear beneath the eyes, its shining nonchalance dimmed by neglect. In the light eyes had been such a hunger of longing as they rested on the girl by the table as made them pathetic, albeit they were overlaid with sick repulsion at the spectacle they beheld.

He did not notice the man beside him who walked quietly away.

Once again as McConnel sat sadly in the shadows before the big door on a night soon after this event, there came to him, ambling gracefully out of the darkness, the grotesque form of Simple John, the idiot.

As on that night in the early spring when McConnel smoked in peace with the good and steady future before him, undreaming of evil, Simple John had come to warn him of impending

harm,—a harm so great that its fire was to sear the Factor's soul for all time,—so now again he came out of the dusk with his uncanny warning.

He sat upon the step, gathering his knees into the embrace of his arms, and his greeting was the same flat sentence.

“Bo jou’,” he said.

“Good even’,” said McConnel kindly.

To nothing in Fort Lu Cerne had he ever spoken in so gentle a voice as he ever used to Simple John, whose strange affection had fastened upon him with his first advent in the post, and which had followed him with the fidelity of a dog's ever since. Something there was in the man's strong nature which caught and chained to him the wavering spirit within the mindless body.

“Master,” said Simple John, presently, “there comes a great cloud out of the north,—a great dark cloud that sweeps through the forest. It blows between the trees and fills the trails and covers the land like smoke.”

With a sudden swift motion along the step, a motion indescribably graceful, he neared McConnel and laid a slim hand upon his knee. A shiver like wind in tall grass passed over him, and his voice whimpered in fear.

“Master!” he cried, “oh, Master! It settles

over the post and presses down,—and there is no post!” His voice had risen in quick, keen terror with the last words and the hand on the man’s knee gripped it sharply.

In a moment the vision of the vague brain had passed.

Simple John loosened from the sudden tenseness of his attitude, the hand slid down and once again he clasped his knees.

He looked into the dusk and nodded.

“So,—so,” he muttered.

But the sombre line drew in between the brows of the one time Factor and he tried vainly to pierce the future with its possibilities. Of a sudden a swift thought of the little church with its rude altar and its rusty relics of black cloth flashed before him,—cloth that had once been a habit of the Order of the Sacred Heart, and he sprang to his feet with an oath. He, too, saw the vision of a great black cloud in the north that blew between the trees, filled the trails and covered the land like smoke! He saw it settle around the post,—*his* one-time post,—press down,—and—— But there the vision changed from the prediction. He was still Factor of Fort Lu Cerne in effect, and here was need of strength at last.

He laid a heavy hand for a second’s space upon the idiot’s head, passed in at the door, stood a

moment surveying the low interior of the block-house and, turning, went out and down the main way to the great gate. He swung the gigantic portal to, and its creaking carried on the still air across the settlement, examined the forged iron bars one by one and shot them forward into their sockets. Then he turned and looked back across the post that had been his secret pride, the wrecked and stricken post whose reign of terror was not yet done.

Within his being was accepted without question the certainty of this thing whose vague prescience troubled the delicate strings of the idiot's perception and set them vibrating with warning.

Alone and in the night he set to work to see to all things within the stockade, that he might be able to do at last one service for the post wherein he had failed so signally,— failed in his zeal for the Company he served, failed in understanding of his people, failed in his life's ambition.

Not once did the thought of Sylvestor, the man who represented the power of that Company and who had deposed him, branding him as thief, maltreater and liar, enter his mind. He still looked to himself for authority, relying on his own strength, his own knowledge and ability.

He first made a circle of the stockade, looking it over carefully, every upright log of the thickness

of his waist, every wedge and bar and pin that held it solid, and here and there he frowned as he felt with a practiced hand along the line of the earth. Twenty years ago it had been a good wall. Since then sun and snow and worm had not been idle. Still its strength was great, indeed for the most part as great as at the beginning, yet it was in unlooked-for places that the touch of weakness crept in like a little fox. These places he marked with a tack of paper from a small note book in his pocket, and having made a complete circle which brought him again to the main gate, he went up the road to Headquarters.

Simple John was gone from the step and the desolate loneliness was settled back in its accustomed place.

McConnel did not sleep that night. All through the hot hours his candle flared from window and door, staying a long time in the great store room where were stored the arms of the settlement. Here was ammunition in packed cases as it had come up by dog train the winter before, and rifles for more men than Fort Lu Cerne, alas! could muster now.

The blockhouse, built with frank thought of a future wherein white man strove with red man for right of trail and land and life, was a grim triumph of invincibility.

On barred window and studded door, chain and bolt and bar were sound.

These he noted with approval, though he had known every point of the structure since his first advent in the post. A goodly amount of stores still remained lining the thick walls and several giant hogsheads waited for water.

Here might that portion, pitiably small indeed, of the populace of Fort Lu Cerne spared by the sickness hold out indefinitely in case of siege, barring one element of warfare,—that fiendish ally of the savage, fire.

Day found him still pulling into corners and beneath windows bales and barrels and boxes, and at this hour came to him France Thebau, bearer it seemed ever of the tale of death, with a message that he come quickly to the Corlier cabin. Richard Sylvestor was stricken of the fever and demanded speech with him.

McConnel set his lips and dropped his work, going as he was, tired and sweat drenched from the night's labour. France caught a startled glance of a martial interior where rows of cartridges lay on barrelheads at every porthole, and rifles, two to a place, stood crossed beside them, where every inch of space was arranged with precision and simplicity, as if the spirit of stern resistance stalked barefaced throughout an arsenal and war waited for but a coming shot.

The light of another despairing day ushered him into the low log room where a silent small circle waited his coming.

On a bed in the centre lay the slim form of Sylvester, his weak face working in the fear of death, his hands playing at random over the sheet and his shoulders raised in the arms of Lois Le Moyne, the woman he was to have married. The brilliant eyes lighted on the square face of McConnel, lined with the year's experience, begrimmed with dust and sweat, unlovely, forbidding, stern in its half pathetic puzzlement at the ways of Fate, and into them leaped the venom of hatred.

"I'm going, all right," he cried instantly, "but don't you think, Angus McConnel, for one moment that you have won in this fight between us two. I drew up papers last night, under the hand of Le Roc, which will as surely fix you at Henriette and punish you for your dastardly and coward spite against a woman, as I am surely going out with my life unfinished. I want you to know that it is I who have won,—I who am ahead at every point, who have taken from you every last atom of your achievement, either real or desired. Now I command you with my last breath of authority to deliver up to Le Roc the keys of that block-house!" He fell back, panting, on the breast of the girl behind him, flaming at the heavy man before him with the fire of an honest enmity.

Sylvestor had fought squarely, to the best of his exotic manhood, for the sake of a woman, believing his quarrel straight.

Now he had shot his last bolt, striving to finish entirely the thing he had begun. But Angus McConnel only stood a moment looking at him with his cold blue eyes and spoke one word of curt refusal.

"I will surrender only to the man from Henriette with the seal of all the H. B. Company," he said, turned on his heel and strode out the door.

Of all the expressions on the worn faces of the little group of those who tended there, that which rested on the face of Lois Le Moyne was the most curious.

This meeting had not been of her devising, having its inception in the mind of Sylvestor alone.

Her eyes dropped and they were inscrutable in their flickering lights and shadows, as she laid Sylvestor back upon the bed.

"Go," she said turning to those present. "Cleo, you need the rest of an hour. I will tend here through the day."

So they went away from the cabin, some to a few hours, heavy sleep, others to serve yet longer in other cabins, and at last this man was to have alone for the grace of his last day this girl for whose sake he was to die.

For it was as surely for her sake that he was dying now as that the sun shone in the heavens. If it had not been for that Lois Le Moyne who smiled from the guardhouse window with the drooping of lips and the gentleness of eyes, he would have been, long ago, back among the pleasures of his kind in Henriette.

Something of this arose in the mind of the girl, but it did not trouble her. She beheld it calmly, for she was beyond the law of remorse.

He had served her purpose, she had paid for that serving with the promise of herself, therefore she stayed beside him now doing for him the best she could, soothing his restlessness with a tenderness she did not feel.

As soon as they were alone he threw his hot head in the bend of her arm, catching her hand in both his own.

"A beast of a man," he panted, "keep out of his power, Lois. Never let him get a grip upon you in any way. Promise!"

The curious look upon the girl's face deepened as she promised.

Sylvestor, quick to read a sign, saw it, but misinterpreted.

"You fear him!" he cried. "Oh, Lois, my heart's heart! And I will not be here!"

"No,—no,—" soothed Lois gently, "I have

no fear. Beside, M'sieu, what is there for such as I to fear,—I who have naught in the world for hope or anxiety or ambition?" The words were quick and they held a bitterness which filled the listener with joy. What could so blight a woman's life save the loss of one she loved? And the doubt that had ever underlain the triumph of her surrender to him passed forever.

His pale eyes were alight with the mighty passion which sometimes Fate places in such a hollow, sensuous nature as his. They burned upon her face with a compelling power which thrilled her to her finger tips, albeit there was no answering passion in her soul for him. The very strength of it appealed to her and stirred her.

"Lois, idol of my soul, queen of all women, my pearl of the wilderness, you do love me,—you do?"

There was a beauty in his burning eyes, a winsome beauty of high idolatry, of pure passion, forgetful of self,—the same true fire that was lighted in the heart of the French half-breed, only there it was to be an undying flame, here it was but a flash.

"You do love me, Lois?" he gasped with his hot breath.

"Yes, M'sieu," whispered the girl soothingly, "yes."

With a sigh he pressed his face against her

breast and so great was the joy within him and the peace it brought that for a time he forgot the nearness of the Grim Shadow and fell into a silent sleep.

So Cleo, coming from her rest an hour later, found them.

"If you would go for word of the boy and Marcel, Cleo?" Lois whispered. "I would know how they are faring."

Cleo, glad of the diversion, went, and Lois watched her through the open door. The sun was hot on the roadbed and the dust was deep under foot.

The stalks of those poor flowers planted in the joyous and unguessing spring were coated heavily with its grey fineness. The hewn slabs on the roofs of the cabins were warped and curled with the heat.

The sad business of the post was going forward. Up the way from the shut gate Palo Le Roc was coming and beside him Old Blanc gesticulated excitedly. Along the stockade wall at the north were strung out here and there four trappers who tapped and worked with sledges, driving in heavy wedge-like bars, setting long braces, strengthening the palisades at every weak point, and back and forth with his hands locked behind him walked McConnel.

From the door of the Bleaurot cabin issued

Pierre Vernaise, going toward the church with a candle in his hand. A new dignity seemed to encompass the youth, a strength and quiet purpose which changed his very bearing.

A wave of real tenderness swept over Lois and she turned her eyes to the weak face sleeping on her arm.

Life indeed was a strange tangle.

Richard Sylvestor loved her and was dying for that love, yet she had no feeling of any sort for him save a straight and honest desire to pay the debt she owed him,— Pierre loved her, to receive a maternal tenderness, being in his turn loved by little Jaqua, while she herself ——— But there her thought checked itself with sick sternness.

Cleo was coming back.

“It is of the abating, Lois,— Thanks be to le bon Dieu!—the sickness,” she said gladly. “Marcel is yet most weak, but she is all of a sad smile when she looks at the child an’ all of tears in her poor eyes when she look’ at the empty bed in the corner. Netta does amazing well in the attendance.”

Throughout the whole long day Sylvestor slept and woke fitfully to find always the woman he loved bending over him, bathing his hot face and soothing him with voice and hand, answering his weak caresses readily and filling his vision and his

wavering thoughts, which were growing vague, with her lie of love. Toward evening he sank into a rose-hued dream of Paradise where soft winds blew upon him and Lois' face drifted upon golden clouds.

That it was in reality a thin face with dark shadows beneath the great black eyes and high cheekbones showing through the worn flesh, he did not know. It was still beautiful to him, tender, womanly, love-filled, and he was content.

That his dream of love and its short triumph had ever been as hollow and unreal as this fancy of his closing day, mattered not since he had never known. The fear of death had passed with Lois' nearness, indeed the very thought was gone, and he slipped down to the twilight with a smile on his lips, parted in the light beard.

Lois sat on the bed, still holding the slight shoulders in her arms while the sun dropped behind the rim of the forest. She was dead weary, soul and body, and she waited the end, patiently impatient. It was a beautiful twilight, purple and gold and crimson, fading to silver and palest pink and lavender where the long streamers of light shot up into the deepening blue of the great dome, changing to a sinister opalescence where they encountered the copper haze glowing above the hills in the north.

With the coming of the swift dark the man on the bed turned his face to her breast with a little contented motion, sighed once and lay still,— forever.

Lois laid him down presently and straightened up, pushing the hair back from her face.

“Lois, come here,” said Cleo, in a low tone from the doorway. The girl stepped over and stood beside her.

“Listen,” said Cleo, “and look there.”

There was some commotion at the great gate. A bunch of men were gathered there and others were running from here and there toward them.

From without the wall came a mingling of sounds, the myriad sounds of a great concourse of people, calls, and cries and chatterings, the stroke of falling tepee poles and the neighing of ponies. Old Blanc’s wife turned white in the dusk.

“Mary Mother!” she whispered, “the Indians!”

CHAPTER XX

A WHITE SACRIFICE

AYE! The Indians indeed. As far as one, looking through the porthole in the wall beside the great gate could see, they were pouring into the cleared space around the post between the stockade and the forest. They came with the paraphernalia of the quick trail, tepees snatched up and rolled around their poles fastened to their ponies, in which baglike troughs in many instances there lay the swaddled forms of the sick, loose bundles, carried on the backs of the squaws, of things hastily gathered from the suddenly moving camp, and all bearing the confused appearance of sudden action.

Grim, half naked warriors stalked among the concourse, painted with the brilliant colours of menace, the vermillion and green of war, the yellow of disaster.

They had brought their women and children, therefore it was a matter of moment, not a sally of young warriors on the warpath whose probable attack on the post could be repulsed and settled, if not by guns, by gifts and fire-water, and tobacco.

They came and came and there seemed to be no end of them. Around the post on every side they circled, pitching their huge camp, and it was plain that they were the legions of some mighty tribe. They were heavily armed and McConnel, looking from the vantage of the porthole in the gate, frowned darkly when he saw that each warrior carried a Company rifle. They were neither Crees nor Ojibways, and they came from the north. There was only one tribe in the wilderness whose chiefs had held aloof from the post, refusing either trade or friendship, one tribe whose numbers were uncounted, whose ways were unknown to the white man and whose stronghold lay in the untrailed wilderness to the north of the Red Hills,— the dread tribe of the Blackfeet of whose strength and cruelty vague tales drifted down from time to time.

No man of the post had ever been among them, no one but the good priest, Father Tenau, so long tarrying from his people in their dire need now, ever having penetrated to the heart of their unfriendly country. He had once spent a season among them and he had come back thin and haggard and had never spoken of that season's experiences. His people had looked upon him with awe of the sadness in his beautiful old eyes, wondering what strange sights they had beheld. Yet he had come back laden with savage gifts of those

things which the people of the wilderness dedicate to the service of the Great Spirit. What had passed in that summer of Father Tenau's unusual life none in Fort Lu Cerne ever knew, what grip he had taken of their savage souls, what he had done to them or they to him, and why, though they held him in some peculiar reverence as evidenced by the sacred gifts, he yet had never gone back among them to press his advantage for the winning of their souls.

Campfires soon began to send up their thin spirals in the evening air on all sides of the fort. Dogs barked and the shrill wailing of children came out of the stillness. With calm precision this concourse of savage foes entrenched itself in camp around the little handful of whites waiting within their stricken post, a tiny knot of aliens lost in the primeval heart of the great woods whose very depth and vastness seemed to aid and urge on the painted fiends which were its natural offspring.

Dark fell and there was no movement of the host outside. They would wait until morning for the parley.

In the meantime, McConnel, having satisfied himself of this and stationed watchers at every porthole, went himself to Headquarters. Here with Old Blanc he set to work unpacking and dis-

tributing the ammunition. Every man who could stand, came and got rifle and belt and cartridges, carrying them to the gate, placing them at intervals around the stockade, making ready for anything that might happen. They were grim and quiet, these men who worked in the summer darkness, and there was no fear on their faces. Death had become so common a thing that its nearness in any other form held no terror. But among the women it was not so. Frightened eyes peered into each other and ashen lips whispered from door to door.

In the Corlier cabin Lois Le Moyne left the silent figure on the bed uncovered and went down the road to where Marcel Roque, not yet able to walk, sat up with the sleeping child in her arms, gazing out from the unlighted house with eyes in which all the misery of earth struggled with the slow returning calmness of her patient strength.

The girl went in and sat down on the foot of the bed. The woman's sad heart thrilled silently at that unrecognised thing within which had sent her to her at this first moment of the great crisis.

Ah! What was there not in this strange girl with her half savage nature, her hauteur, and her pride, her strength and her coldness!

Netta Baupre had fled and they were alone.

"The Blackfeet?" asked Marcel.

"Aye," said Lois.

There was silence for a little while. These two women were both, each after her own fashion, of heroic mould. Here there was no wringing of hands, no hysterical trembling, no tears.

For some unaccountable reason, Lois' thoughts went back to the day at the window of the guard-house and she heard again the voice of Marcel saying with quiet faith, "I need no more, Lois." Something unfamiliar stirred in her breast and she put out a hand and laid it on the covering of the child.

Instantly Marcel's covered it. A bandage was still about the wrist and at its touch the woman's eyes filled with tears in the darkness.

So do men give voice to friendship and the love that cannot speak, in the strong touch of hands, in the swelling throat, in the calm presence in the face of danger. This girl had played a strange part in Marcel's life, having decided for her when Death demanded herself or the man she loved, sacrificed her husband and at last saved to her her idol, the child, by the gift of her own warm blood. It was a strange tie between them, one that would have been hard of supporting between any other two of womankind.

Now they sat silently together when all their little world was shaken at a new and greater dan-

ger than had yet threatened, for here might be annihilation for all.

At last Lois rose.

"There is still work," she said, "for all have forsaken the cabins like the marsh-birds that forsake their young at the voice of danger. I go to the Le Rocs'. Tessa ails and Palo is not to be spared from the man-work now. I will come again by daybreak."

Marcel did not speak and the girl passed out again into the night.

The dark had fallen very heavily. Early in the evening there had been a slim, pale circle of the new moon hanging low above the church in the west. It was gone and there were no candles lighted anywhere in the post save those burning weirdly on the altar in the place of worship. Lois looked that way and a sudden yearning came into her soul. The black iron crucifix lay deep in the baked earth behind the church, clasped in the frail old hands of her father. She had long been a stranger to the sweet words of religion save as she offered the service for the dead, and now a longing for its healing power, its gentle soothing, took hold upon her heart. She turned her steps toward the holy place. As she passed up the dust-filled road a figure emerged out of the darkness ahead. That way, too, lay her destination, the cabin of

the Le Rocs'. No doubt Palo was hurrying down from a snatched visit to his young wife. Lois stopped.

"M'sieu Le Roc," she said, "is anyone with Tessa?"

"Eh?" came the voice of McConnel, Factor of Fort Lu Cerne in effect, out of the shadows.

The face of the girl went deadly white. She shut the hands at her sides, lifted her head and walked slowly by. But she turned toward the cabin of Palo Le Roc and did not look again at the faintly gleaming windows of the little church.

Between the church and Palo's cabin there stood a tiny hut, a lonesome bit of a cabin, detached, unkempt, where Simple John, the idiot, had his pathetic home. Here there was never the sound of voices nor the blessing of companionship, for the pitiable being had no soul on earth except his own.

No light shown from the one window and Lois, turning her head in the darkness, saw that the door was partly open. Instinct sent her to peep within.

In the deeper darkness of the interior she could make out dimly a huddled heap just beyond the sill. She bent and touched it. It was the unconscious form of Simple John, whose turn had come. Verily the Great Sickness was impartial. She went inside and, stooping, gathered the figure in

her arms and lifted it on to the bed in the corner. She lighted the piece of candle she had learned to carry in her pocket and looked around.

There was nothing to do.

This poor creature must take his chance with all those better ones stricken since the doctress' herbs had given out. Lois wet a cloth and laid it on the pale brow, placed a cup of water beside the bed, and went away.

Fort Lu Cerne was very still. The girl looked up at the burning stars and again the alien thoughts that had troubled her these many days came thronging back to her brain. Life. What was it? A tangle of uncertain things in truth, where the threads of Destiny were lost and hidden in the woof of sad mistakes, where the highest, finest impulses of which a soul might be capable were wronged and lowered, trampled, trodden under foot,—aye! even called by the lowest of all names, misunderstood and persecuted.

Life indeed was not much to lose, life as this girl had known it.

To-morrow might see its surrender.

The thought had no terror for her. Only the way of it caused a tiny shudder to pass through her. The vague tales of those Indians out there came back to her, tales of prisoners burned at the stake, of fiendish atrocities whose like was not,

known south of the Red Hills since the other tribes of the wilderness had become, these many years back, friends and allies of the post.

Only for Marcel, her more than friend, and the tiny boy with the lovely face and long curls, a wave of anguish passed over her. They at least should not fall into savage hands so long as she could handle a merciful rifle. This she vowed to herself as she stepped in at the door of Palo's cabin.

And here was another of the tragedies of that life whose eternal questions had begun their march through the mind of this girl of the wilderness, a tragedy so great and pitiful that it dwarfed those others into insignificance.

From out of the dusk of the room came the low sound of a woman's sobbing, the soothing of some motherly voice, tragic in its calmness, and cutting through them both the tiny wail of a new-born child.

Lois was not needed here, so she backed out of the door again and walked away into the night, this time aimlessly, and presently her steps turned unconsciously toward the lonely grave behind the church. It was the first time since she had buried Old Jaques.

So passed this night in the settlement, hushed, fearful, waiting, with the men working steadily that all might be in readiness for what might come

and the women weeping in terror. The sounds of the great new camp outside ceased toward morning and sleep gave its blessed peace to those who were calm enough to take it.

Angus McConnel, sitting alone before the pine desk in the big room, leaned his head on his hands and spent the dragging hours in thought.

What would develop he did not know. Yet he knew the Blackfeet and their ways and his stern mouth set hard at memories of certain things.

In the Bleaurot cabin pretty Jaqua clung to the breast of Pierre Vernaise, begging like a frightened child for safety.

Behind the church Lois Le Moyne sat all night by the grave of her father.

With first dawn all within the post was astir.

Outside came the waking sounds of the Indian camp and when the sun had topped the rise of the forest in the east the first act of the tragedy took place.

There was a great beating on the closed gate and a long pole to which was attached a white rag climbed up the reach of the palisade to wave in the morning air.

The Indians demanded speech.

McConnel, coming down the road from Headquarters, saw it and went quietly to the gate.

Around him were gathered all the men of the post.

They did not venture to ask what they would do. With the quick habit of their lives they accepted his authority without question. Once again he was the Factor, strong, silent, dominant. Forgotten at that moment were all the wrongs, the misunderstandings, the heart aches of the past year. Forgotten was Sylvester with his brief authority, so recently eliminated from the post's affairs that he was not yet under ground, forgotten the easy swerving of their own allegiance. They only saw in the hour of need their Factor, once more come into his own, and they flocked to him like sheep to a leader.

It was the Factor, once more unbending in his service, who lifted hand to the great bar of the gate.

The morning sun streamed in as he swung the portal partly open, with a file of men behind to force it shut at a moment's notice, and stepped into the opening.

Gathered before the gate was a mighty circle of warriors, painted from head to heel, adorned with the habiliments of war, lowerings of features and sullen. In the centre of that circle, stately, magnificent in his giant proportions, spectacular, the rising sun on his towering headdress of eagle

feathers which swept the ground behind, there stood in his savage majesty the chief of the Black-feet, Tilligamok.

He bore no trace of ever having seen McConnel before and there was no friendliness upon his scowling face.

The Factor faced him, stern and quiet as himself, and waited for him to speak, since he had demanded the parley.

Presently he spoke, his deep gutturals sounding ominous in their insolent consciousness of power.

“For many years the Red Man has lived in the forest. As many years as the sun-god has lived in the heavens. To his hand have come the red deer and buffalo, the moose and the elk, the fox and the wolf and the otter. Of their flesh he has eaten, of their skins he has made his tepees. To his door have come the song birds that he might listen and be at peace. All good things have been given him by the Great Spirit because he is the Son of the Forest and the Great Spirit together, and his ways are good. He has lived and died in happiness. Now comes into the land of the Red Man the Pale Faces from another land. The Great Spirit frowns and is angry. Therefore he looks upon his children with displeasure. He is offended. Therefore he sends into their camps the Great Sickness which devours them as the

wolves the red deer. They die and the death song is not hushed from moon to moon. Then speaks the Great Spirit to Mishwa, medicine man, 'The sickness shall not abate until my children shall offer fit sacrifice, even a sacrifice of the pale-face people whose habitation is a sore upon the land.' The children of the Great Spirit must obey. They have come."

The chief ceased and looked McConnel squarely in the eyes with the old challenge of the Red Man to the White. Hatred was in that look and ready menace.

"Tilligamok is a false friend," spoke the Factor in the Blackfoot tongue, slowly and distinctly, "he has eaten flesh with his white brothers, he has sat at their fires. He has come the long trail to have the peace talk in their tepees. Now he has forgotten and would demand a sacrifice of them.

"The post of Fort Lu Cerne is strong, there are many rifles and much powder within its walls, also much provision and water. Tilligamok would do better to take his braves back to the Red Hills. There is no sacrifice among his white brothers for him."

With the last word the challenge in the face of the Indian changed to savage ferocity. He uttered a swift word and in a second there was chaos without the gate. The circle of warriors broke

like a wave and poured forward with one swoop. Eager hands grasped at McConnel, a tomahawk whizzed by his head, landing some feet up the main way inside the post, and with one swift leap he bounded within the palisade, black of brow and swearing, just in time. The wedge behind the gate flung it to and Palo Le Roc shot the great bars into place.

“Now what, M’sieu?” he said as he turned to face the Factor.

CHAPTER XXI

“TAKE THAT, M’SIEU!”

PANDEMONIUM raged outside. Cries and guttural yells shocked the golden morning. They were indeed fiends and demons that sought to frighten into compliance without a struggle that little handful of people within the stockade. But they were of the conquering race, that handful, and they were not to be frightened until the last expedient had been tried and had failed.

“Man the portholes,” said the Factor, the words rapping out with that decision which saw its point at once, went for it, and did not change, “be ready to fire the first volley in two minutes.”

Warfare was to begin and he would start it.

Scattering from the big gate, all but enough to man its portholes, the trappers fled along the wall to either side, the two ends of the diverging parties meeting behind the church, having dropped two men at every barrel with its load of shells and its crossed rifles.

McConnel stepped on the barrel beside the gate that he might see and be seen from every vantage point around the stockade. When all was in readi-

ness, each man watching for the first sign, he raised his hand.

Out on the clear air rang the first defiant cry of battle, a volley of shots that ringed the post, carrying its arrogant note of invincible strength, saying plainly to that host without that Fort Lu Cerne was not only unscared but belligerent, ready and willing to fight.

Cries of rage, and here and there of more than rage, went up on all sides, and an instant reply pinged like hail against the palisade.

The Blackfeet were in deadly earnest.

From the portholes it could be seen that they were formed for siege. Directly around the post and just within the edge of the forest, where the great boles of the trees would make excellent shields, swarmed the warriors, an innumerable host, painted and hideous. Far back rose the smoke of their campfires, where the women had withdrawn out of the range of danger and near enough to serve. A quick interchange of volleys followed the first, with no damage done on either side. The stern wall on one side and the protecting forest on the other made that sort of warfare but a waste of good powder and ball.

They were eager and alert, those thin men behind the portholes, already worn by the long siege of an enemy, filled with the fire of battle, glad of

a chance to strike back. They knew they were outnumbered twenty to one, but they had their trust in the old palisade, and, if that should fail, in the blockhouse itself. They watched, keen-eyed, from the portholes, and every time a painted form darted from one tree to another a rifle cracked with such certainty that more than one warrior leaped into the air with his death cry ringing suddenly above the shots. The advantage was all with the post.

Not a man was visible to the savages, and their bullets imbedded themselves harmlessly in the seasoned logs. It did not take them long to realise this. The shots ceased presently and there was a lull in proceedings.

Not an Indian was in sight. There might have been, for sake of all appearances, no living soul within a hundred leagues of Fort Lu Cerne.

The forest was as still as a forsaken desert. McConnel knew that Tilligamok had gathered his headmen for the laying of plans.

And this was true, for presently with a chorus of yells a dark wedge came flying out of the trail and a giant log, covered with gleaming copper forms, hurled itself with a boom that resounded throughout the settlement and shook the palisade, against the great gate. Rifles spat from the portholes commanding the entrance and took their toll

from the copper forms, but more flew from the sheltering trees and took their places as the wedge withdrew to come again. It was a gigantic ram and the gate shook beneath its impact, shrieking in bar and brace and bolt, holding its studded breast bravely before its people, yet crying in pain.

The Factor with an oath sprang down, caught up a block and threw it upon the barrel head, snatched a rifle and, leaping to this vantage point, fired down upon the mass without the gate from the top of the wall.

His bare head, sandy and leonine, flamed like fire in the morning sun.

The light shining upon it caught the eyes of Lois Le Moyne on the step of Marcel's cabin. They dilated and clung a moment to that spot of light as if with some power beyond the girl's control. As the man leaped down a flight of bullets chipped the top of the blockade where he had appeared.

But the heavy gate had held and four Indians lay in various attitudes before it, while more were crawling away into the undergrowth. Tilligamok drew back his warriors. Throughout the day they tried various ruses, keeping up a constant menace that the men at the portholes might get no rest, making sham sorties to draw their fire, vainly

seeking to get in against the stockade beneath the line of the rifles which protected it.

This, McConnel noticed with a scowl. Two young bucks had deliberately sacrificed themselves in the attempt and he began to see that they would stop at nothing in their fanatic zeal to obey the Great Spirit as interpreted by Mishwa. A white sacrifice was needed to remove the ban and a white sacrifice they would have at all cost.

And the fate of that sacrifice!

Every man in the post, assailed by that thought, shuddered.

The sun turned its accustomed round of the brassy heavens, beating down on the little band of defenders, which numbered scarce more than enough to man the wall, without mercy. Within the cabins those of the women able to control themselves prepared food and sent it out from man to man, and she who directed, worked, and at last took pail and basket and went the rounds herself, was Lois Le Moyne, whose fingers itched for a rifle.

And it was due to that stern thing within which made her what she was that when, in the course of her serving from the blessed water and the reviving food, she came to that stand by the great gate where McConnel, dust-grimed, sweating, his shirt thrown open from his massive throat, his

seamed face dark with powder smoke, his blunt fingers light as a lady's on trigger and shell, stood firing with dogged regularity; she halted, white-faced and silent, and held up to him his portion of her burden.

He turned from the wall and looked down at her and the sternness of battle was still in his steel-blue eyes.

Without a word he took the offered cup, tossing off a great draught, picked an ash cake from the basket and turned back to his grim work. The girl walked on, but the old tumult was raging in her breast, the old fire strove with a fiercer flame.

As dusk fell and night drew on, McConnel sent for Palo Le Roc, busy at the far side of the settlement.

"Le Roc," he said calmly, "they're trying to get in under the fire to the base of the wall. If they ever do, they'll fire it. It is their only chance, and our worst peril. The whole post is dry as tinder. We must keep them out. Take what of the men you can from the wall, yet leave one at every stand, and make torches. Set them on the palisade and light them. We must watch all night."

Here again the deft hands of Lois came in for that work whose ample plentitude was her one

resource, into which she plunged at the beginning with Old Jaques's death and whose unceasing cry had kept steady the shaking soul within her.

She went with Palo to the store room where were the cans of oil kept for just such emergencies, and throughout the hours of the night that followed, while the shots still barked from the palisade and the hideous yells shattered the silence without, she wound and dipped the torches which flamed like beacons of disaster against the darkness at intervals along the wall. Netta Baupre worked beside her, whispering as she worked, capable Cleo Corlier, scolding and outdoing both, chattered constantly, while the men came and went, bringing the burnt-out sticks to be re-wound, taking the fresh supply.

At midnight Lois, looking up with that strange feeling of eyes upon one's face, beheld in the doorway the pale face of Marcel Roque, where she clung weakly to the lintel.

"Marcel!" she cried, "why did you come?"

"I don't know, Lois," said her friend, "but I had to come."

The girl got up at once, took Marcel by the shoulder and marched her back to the cabin.

"You stay within," she said firmly, "there is no need of you. When there is the danger, Marcel, I will come to you."

And Marcel read the hidden meaning in her words.

She bowed her head a moment on the girl's shoulder.

"Oh, Lois,—Lois!" she said brokenly.

Another dawn found a ring of haggard men at the portholes. They were not of sufficient numbers to effect a complete change, therefore they stood in shift of thirds, relieving one-third every three hours for rest and sleep.

Outside the Indians were in savage fettle. They knew to a nicety how long it would take them to wear out that handful of defenders, and yet they were in haste to get their white sacrifice and appease their god.

Therefore they did not intend to waste this day as they had wasted the one before.

All night they had tried to crawl in to the base of the palisade, and all night they had been repulsed by the grim watchers inside, who did not sleep nor relax their vigilance.

Again Cleo and others of the women cooked a huge breakfast, and again Lois, who had not closed her eyes all through the night, went out among the men at the wall, this time with pails of steaming coffee.

The glowing morning was as a pearl of beauty dropped in the rose and pale-blue lap of infinity.

It was yet too early for the scorching heat. A cool shadow lay behind the church, and Lois in passing cast a swift glance at the peaceful mound which covered all of her blood she had ever known.

Again her weary mind turned to the unconquered question,—Life.

This morning in passing back by the storeroom she stepped inside, picked up a rifle, examined it, and adding some ammunition, placed it where she could put her fingers on it at a moment’s notice.

Within her heart some prescience warned that this was like to be the last of Fort Lu Cerne’s days, and she would be ready,—she and Marcel and the child. She looked up toward the church again where those graves, dug in advance for their coming occupants before this last danger threatened, still yawned empty. Within the cabins were already waiting those occupants, forgotten in the common peril of those who survived.

As she turned toward the cabin of Marie Mercier, on whose hearth hung the big cauldron of coffee and cooked the kettles of food for the men, a sudden gorgeous spectacle arrested her steps. Across the delicate sky there curved a sailing tail of flame which sank gracefully downward, landing in the deep dust of the road. Netta Baupre pounced upon it with a cry. It was an Indian fire

arrow. Swift in its wake sailed up another, then a third, which circled high and, dropping beautifully, landed on the dry slabs of the Le Moyne roof, warped by the heat into fantastic curls. The screams of the women brought, running, such of the men as were not in actual action at the wall.

In the space of a breath a swift tongue of flame leaped to heaven from the tinder of the sun-baked roof. But swifter of foot than all others, the girl reached first the threshold of her home. With trembling hands she flung wide the door, looked all around the interior, as if taking a quick farewell, her eyes travelling from object to object of the familiar things, the bed where Old Jaques had died, the hearth where had hung the ill-fated and beautiful deerskin for the beading she had renounced so strangely, the picture of the Madonna above the tinselled box she had once used as a shrine, the silver fox on the floor, even the little buckskin bag which contained the pathetic relics of that unknown mother who had given her birth hanging on a peg beside the shrine, and in that moment died some more of the Life she could not understand.

As the men came surging up she turned on the step, closed the door and hung the buckskin latch across its peg.

"It is but waste of time, M'sieus," she said

calmly, "the cabin is detached. It will fire naught else. Go back to the watching of the more settled part."

So passed with the roaring flames that stabbed the soft morning sky the last vestige of those homely things which bound this girl to the life of her kind.

Her sombre eyes were wide in her tired face as she turned away to whatever serving might fall to her hand.

Pierre Vernaise was passing up from the main gate, grimed with fighting.

Lois stopped and looked deeply into his face. A tender smile trembled a moment on her lips.

That deep look needed no words, and neither spoke, passing with the lift of soul that comes from communion of kindred spirits in the moment of a great crisis.

Things had begun to happen within the stockade after a fashion which brought a scowl between the Factor's brows. From every point those flaming meteors leaped into the helpless settlement — with its one good well shrunk to a grudging serving of human thirst alone. Here and there they landed, and in this place and that fled up the quick flame of their kindling, while those men, weary of soul and worn of body, turned to face yet another foe, fighting the fire with blanket and

hand, clambering from roof to roof, shouting for others as the rain of burning arrows increased from all sides.

At last the Factor, watching both ways from his vantage by the gate, sent forth a stentorian command:

“Gather in at Headquarters!”

Danger drew near with that stirring cry. If they must fight fire as well as Indians, they would fight for the blockhouse alone, which stood in its open space. Immediately they began to come in from all the cabins, women and children mostly, with here and there a man carrying his sick, bearing in their arms such of their family gods as they could not abandon even in such dire stress.

Palo Le Roc left his ceaseless work long enough to fetch on a hastily improvised stretcher, with young Henri's help, his wife Tessa and the tiny babe crying on her breast.

As they passed, beyond the church, the lonely hut of Simple John, Palo in the listening kindness of his great heart caught a moaning cry.

When he had established Tessa on a huge pile of furs in a corner of the big room, where the gentle hands of the women took her in charge, he hurried back to that pathetic abode where no living being cared for its helpless inmate.

From the bed in the corner the blank eyes of

the idiot stared hopelessly at him. Cleo had fed and watched him from time to time, but he was very near to the shadow. With a strange whim of the Terror, which did not act alike twice, that vague thing which stood for reason in the clouded mind had come back at the last to fight for its unstable throne.

"The wind is in the trees," he whispered with vague trouble as the man approached and, slipping his arms beneath the slender figure, lifted Simple John for his last journey, "the wind is heavy in the trees." The weak head fell back, but righted itself with a jerk as Palo made for the door. The idiot flung out his hands and caught the lintel. The blank eyes were startled.

"The chest," he cried strongly, "the little chest!"

Palo strove to pull his hold away from the door, but he clung madly.

"The chest," he whimpered pathetically, "the chest beneath the bed."

So Palo, great, kindly man, lay down his burden and groping under the wretched bed brought forth a small, old-fashioned box with hinges of brass, made smooth and shining by the touch of many hands. He gathered into his mighty arms these two who would not be separated and went out in the sunlight and down to the blockhouse.

Fire was roaring to the skies from two cabins and shouts and cries resounded in the fort. The lips of the men were grim. The women wept for the most part, yet here and there a stouter heart faced its end bravely.

Without, triumph sounded in every savage yell.

Of a sudden there rose, flickering above the wall of the stockade, a crop of little flames dancing along its top at a point a little to the south of the main gate. In the rush to beat down the danger within the post too many men had left the wall. One porthole had been left for a moment unguarded and the wily foes had done their work. It seemed at last as if the end had come. With the palisade gone, there would remain but the blockhouse.

McConnel, ever the Factor, looking for the best, drew at once every man from the wall. There yet remained some moments before the savages would pour through the breach. These he used to an advantage.

They were gathered in the open place before the door, a crowd of haggard men, pale beneath the smoke and the grime, dishevelled, unkempt, panting with the fever of fight, and they surged around their Factor, waiting for the last word.

It bore a strange resemblance, that gathering, to another not so far back in the history of Fort

Lu Cerne, when they had stood on the same spot to hear this man cast out from them, robbed of his manhood's honour, deposed, yet no one thought of that time, save Angus McConnel alone, and it was with a grim galdness that he followed it now with another thought in whose simple greatness the soul of the man showed forth.

"Le Roc," he said in the moment's hush that fell save for the crackling of flames and the yelling outside, "everything is arranged in the storeroom for resistance. If need should be, you can hold out a considerable time. The hogsheads were filled with water last night. There are rifles and ammunition for more than can handle them. If there should be an attack, fight from the inside for fire in the roof. The big book on the desk keep for the next Factor. It is the memory copy. If the original should ever be found, send it with the other to Henriette for justification."

Without another word he handed to Palo the rifle he carried,—it was grimed and all but useless from overmuch firing,—and turning, walked unarmed toward the gate.

For a moment there was silence of stupid amaze.

Then Palo Le Roc sprang forward and caught the Factor, already some feet away in his plodding progress, by the arm.

"Mother of God, M'sieu! What would you do?" he cried.

McConnel faced him simply.

"It needs but one sacrifice to save the post," he said. "I am the Factor of Fort Lu Cerne."

There was a dignity in the words which quietly claimed his tragic right.

The man beside him dropped his hand and looked into his face. For a moment the glory of the thing tempted Palo to step aside. They were two strong men, these two, but what to McConnel seemed a common and straight duty, was to Palo, with his keener soul, a glory which mounted to the skies.

"Pardon, M'sieu," he said, "it is your right. But if I might speak, I would say that one sacrifice given freely will but lessen the fighting force of us when they come for the massacre, for do you think for one moment, M'sieu, that with their dead in the fringe of trees yonder, with the smell of blood in their throats, with our stockade gone and we acknowledging our helplessness, they will go and leave us with one living being within the post? No, M'sieu, they will come for blood and plunder, and we will be but the easier prey with our Factor gone, one more rifle the less."

Palo ceased in his wisdom, waiting for his words to take effect. McConnel stood frowning upon

the earth, his sandy head bare in the sun, his brows contracted, striving with all his soul to see the best for his people,—his people whom he had ever failed in serving, whom he did not understand and who did not understand him, save for Palo Le Roc, whose eyes were opening in the face of death when it was so late that it did not matter. Which way would he serve them best?

Honestly, with all his slow reason, he strove to see the highest service.

"Hurry, M'sieu," warned Palo, "the wall is burning finely. We will need to go soon within."

Then the Factor raised his head. He had seen a way, the best way, it seemed, and his choice was made.

"There is the idiot," he said, frowning into Palo's eyes, "he is far gone in the sickness, not able to fight. Bring him." But for the first time his hard voice broke and the stern line of his lips worked. The sharp blue eyes were suddenly pitiful in their sternness.

Palo and France Thebau turned instantly.

Inside the big room Simple John lay where Palo had placed him, only now the unstable light of reason, such as it was, had gone from his dull eyes and he lay in apathy.

The two men picked him up and started away.

"What do you do, Palo?" asked Lois Le Moyne, in sudden horror, as she looked up from Tessa on the pile of furs. Palo was too wise to speak, but France was of a running tongue.

"We are to offer the sacrifice at last to the Blackfeet," he said, "'tis the Factor's word."

The girl sprang from the floor and bounded out to where they entered the crowd of men. McConnell was looking down on the face of the strange being who had loved him, grotesque in its unconsciousness.

Lois whirled in and confronted this man, her head up, her eyes flaming above her thin cheeks, her breath coming in gasps of passion, while around the spreading nostrils there quivered the pinched white line of rage.

"M'sieu, the Factor is brave," she cried, her voice shaking with a contempt so deep that it would not be suppressed, so intense that the smart of angry tears stung in her eyes. "He would buy his worthless life with so pitiable a thing as Simple John! Take that, M'sieu!"

Doubling her right hand, knuckles out like a man, she struck him full in the face.

"If there is to be a sacrifice from Fort Lu Cerne it shall be a willing one."

With that regal head still high as God meant it to be, Lois Le Moyne turned to finish that Life

whose worth was nothing and whose end was peace.

The flames had eaten through the palisade. With her last word there was a falling of broken timbers and through the leaping flames there could be seen a mass of painted figures waiting to leap within with the first clearance of the heavy fire.

As she started for this opening there was a cry behind, and Marcel Roque rushed forward, caught the girl about the waist, falling on her knees with her ashen face uplifted.

"Lois! Lois! Lois!" she panted in agony.

"Have calm, Marcel," said Lois quietly.

With a little motion she turned and looked back to where the row of graves lengthened beside the church with the hot shadow of the wooden cross falling athwart its farther end.

Sudden tears clouded her frowning eyes.

"Of all in Fort Lu Cerne I am the least needed."

She loosened Marcel's clinging hands with quick roughness, and, crouching for a swift start, sped like a deer down toward the wall. They watched her go in spellbound silence, open mouthed. Just before that red curtain of swinging flame they saw her crouch again, tense her body for a spring, and in another second she had leaped through it, outside the wall. There was a sudden stillness, and

then out on the morning air there shrilled such a savage sound that those listeners within the doomed post crouched with hands to ears.

The Blackfeet had received their sacrifice.

Angus McConnel stood where the girl had struck him and in his eyes the old puzzlement at the ways of Fate deepened pitifully.

"Lassie!" he cried thickly, as if against his will, unconsciously, "Lassie!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CRUCIFIX IN THE FOREST

OUTSIDE Fort Lu Cerne, Lois Le Moyne, once branded thief and worse, ever a mystery, had shot stumbling, her skirt aflame, into the open arms of crowded scores of savages for sake of that people who had repudiated her.

They caught her, sending up their cry of delight to high heaven at sight of her youth and beauty, for such a sacrifice must indeed be pleasing to the Great Spirit (in whose name the sons of men commit so many crimes!), beat out the fire on her garments,—they were not ready for that factor yet,—and bound her hands behind her with a deerskin thong.

They surged around her, yelling, pressing forward, thrusting their painted visages in her face, gibing, leering, splitting the golden day with their hideous triumph.

She stood among them with her strong shoulders back and her head erect. She lifted her disdainful eyes above their heads and looked deep in the arching blue of the sky, and with a quick perception that sent a thrill to her heart she saw

that its hue was changed. It was deep and tender, soft and far in its illimitable reaches of space, no longer brassy and hard as it had been these many weeks. To the north the queer copper haze was fading above the hills. With the irony of Fate, the signs of the scourge were passing.

The deep heart of that far-off sky seemed, in that moment, to fill the soul of the girl with a quiet peace, to answer the weary questions which had worn her with their ceaseless iteration, to say that this was Life and its purpose, its fulfilment and its end, this saving by its sacrifice of a tattered fragment of a people who had never been her own, even less than they had been McConnel's.

At last the sweet words of prayer came simply to her lips, their exalted solace to her spirit.

She clasped the fingers of her bound hands, forgot the yelling demons leaping about her, and sent her strange soul, unsorry and unafraid, to the feet of her Maker.

"Jesu mia," she whispered, "forgive Thou and accept,——"

But there the words died on her parted lips, the weary calmness of her eyes changed to wonder.

Faint and far on the morning air there came to her ears the sound of distant singing. Soft and faint and inimitably sweet, like the music of that other world to which she was drawing so near, it

drifted down to her, stilling the beating of her heart, hushing the soul of her with its holy wonder. Angels singing beyond the veil of the world!

Surely her sacrifice was good. For once the high head of this girl bowed in humility, the fiery eyes filled with humble tears.

She strained her hearing for that silver strain, rising and falling like a shimmering billow of silken sound blown by the wind of Heaven.

Nearer it came, slowly nearer, rising in its unmatched beauty, falling in solemn cadence. It lifted in increasing volume, rising over the roof of the forest, and suddenly Lois Le Moyne lifted her bowed head, while the look of holy awe on her face changed to comprehension.

She recognised the cadence of that strain.

It was a Latin chant for the dying, and none but Father Tenau had ever sung it in the wilderness.

Absorbed as she had been with the business of her soul, she had paid no heed to that concourse of surging demons which pressed close around her, their naked skins brushing her bound arms, the smell of their war paint in her nostrils. Now with her own descent from Heaven to earth, she was conscious of them. In every attitude they stood around her, like a molten sea of action ar-

rested at its height. Some rigid and straight in their bronze strength, some bent in act of leaping, some leaning as they peered in her face, they stood as they had been stayed and every ear was bent to that sound in the forest. A swift and utter silence had fallen. Only the eaten edges of the burned opening in the stockade, still crackling with their flames, gave forth a voice in the stillness. On the outer edge of the mass of warriors the squaws hovered among the trees.

Nearer and nearer came that silver song. It resolved its floating glory to the opening in the dark wall of the forest before the great gate where the settlement trail went into the wilderness, pouring forth as from some huge cathedral aisle, and presently there was a motion in the vast press of human forms that encompassed the girl, a wave that started far ahead and swept like a wave of the sea, past her and beyond, as that great concourse of savages fell upon their faces on the sun-cracked earth, leaving of all their number she alone upright in their midst, her head still up, her hands bound behind her.

Out of the green mouth of the forest aisle there came a small procession, a band of dark-robed monks, walking two and two, their rosaries in their hands, and at their head the good Father himself, the sun on his bare head and borne aloft

in his hands, swaying with his step, the sacred symbol of redemption, the Holy Crucifix.

The mystery of that year beyond the Red Hills now laid its hand upon the Blackfeet. They fell before him in superstitious reverence.

The sad eyes of the priest, sweeping the sudden scene before him, the barred entrance of the post, the signs of battle, the burning wall of the stockade, the prostrate hordes of savages, and the tall girl standing bound in their midst, took in its import and his mind leaped back to twenty years before, when this same thing had happened.

He knew the Blackfeet and their ways,—ah, who might know them better!

So plainly in that instant he saw again, looking from the past, the lovely face of the little Sister Felice, whose spotless life had bought the safety of this same post of Fort Lu Cerne.

Now again a young girl had been its price. The gentle lips of the Father twitched, to tighten with grim sternness.

His voice, strong and thrilling, though he was an old man, boomed out across the grovelling mass.

“Tilligamok!” he cried, “Chief of Warriors, Tilligamok!”

From close at Lois' side the gigantic form of

the chief arose, towering in its majesty. He faced the priest in silence.

"Tilligamok has done a great wrong," thundered the voice of Father Tenau, "he has followed the words of Mishwa to destruction. The Great Spirit wants no sacrifice by fire. He sends at this moment His Priests to bid the Blackfeet flee before His wrath, else more than the sickness will punish all the tribe. Go, Tilligamok! Gather all the warriors and the women and the children, the ponies and the tepees, and go quick to your land beyond the Red Hills. The sickness shall leave the camps of the Blackfeet as the red light leaves the heavens. It is even now dying in the north. Look! Is it not true?"

The priest waved the tall symbol toward the north. The chief, raising his awe-struck face, gazed after the motion. Of a truth the copper hue, so long staining the canopy of the sky, was fading, even as Lois had noticed an hour back.

Fear and conviction played across the features of the Indian.

He gave a short command.

From all around they began, those painted savages, to creep to their feet, hastening as the movement spread among them, and pressing in eager haste, like startled cattle, toward the shelter of the forest. They pushed and hurried and swayed,

silent and in some uncanny awe, and presently the girl stood alone beside the burning wall, the last of that vast mass to face the Father as he came across the open space that had been a field of battle so short a time before.

With quick hands Father Tenau himself unbound her, and his tones quivered as he muttered above her the tender words of the benedictat.

Then he pushed her through the opening, marshalled his brown brothers after her inside the post, and turning his back upon them, took up his position outside the open way, facing the forest where that herd of wild creatures moved in the obeying of his command, with the holy symbol still raised before him and the sun on his pale face.

For a tense and silent hour, while Fort Lu Cerne held its breath, this splendid old fighter of the wilderness stood so, forcing those savages to his will by the sheer force of his presence and his unknown power over them.

Not until they had started through the forest with all their great camp, the ponies with rolled tepees dragging the sick and wounded, the squaws with their bundles and papooses, the warriors swarming in awed and sullen obedience,—until the last far sound of their myriad-noised going had vanished in the dead green heart of the great

woods, did Father Tenau turn to his people inside the palisade, his worn and tortured people, pale-faced, weary, hopeless, decimated by the sickness, torn by the warring elements of life and death, ridden by trouble and disaster.

The women fell at his feet with tears, kissing his hands and the hem of his garment, giving way to the tremulous passion of reaction, weeping in the very weakness of safety, while the men pressed around in that relief from danger which tightens the lips upon the words of speech.

And after the Father, they thought of Lois Le Moyne, the girl who had tried to save them. She was not to be seen and they went to search for her. In every nook someone looked and called, and presently they found her.

Behind the church she stood by that shrunken mound, her hands clenched and her bosom heaving, ing.

When they rushed to her with outstretched hands, sincere in their contrition and their humility, she struck the outstretched hands with swift fierceness and, turning her back, faced the logs of the church with tear-blind eyes, and why she did not know.

They stood helplessly and looked at her, feeling the old barrier between them and her, misunderstanding still, misunderstood. And then the good

Father himself came around the corner of the church. He saw the situation and again his long-earned knowledge, his perception, and his tact stood him in hand.

He laid a gentle hand on the girl's quivering arm.

"Go," he told his people swiftly, "make ready to march out of Fort Lu Cerne at once. Take only the barest burden of necessary food. Those who are under the illness, yet like to live, put into slings and carry. Those who are far gone,—unconscious,—leave to the mercy of God. Arm each man and woman. We will take the long trail to Henriette within the hour."

The gentle eyes were firm, yet a sadness that was very old wept in their depths. Father Tenau had seen so many tragedies of the forest and the posts.

None knew better than he the unstable Blackfeet.

He had dominated them once by sheer personal force and a certain pose. Whether or not he might do it again when the medicine men had had time to talk to Tilligamok, he did not know.

Therefore would he get his people as far away as he could before a possible return of the enemy.

With awed faces they fled at his command to gather their loved ones, their arms, and their

equipments. And Father Tenau turned for one hasty moment to Lois.

"My daughter," he said, "my daughter."

She did not speak, but the heaving bosom leaped at the tender word.

The old priest stood for a space letting her gain her lost control. Then he turned away to the hurrying post.

"Come, Lois," he said, "there is much to do." And with instant obedience the girl turned and followed him.

There a stern task awaited the good Father. It needed but scant time for that remnant of the populace of Fort Lu Cerne to be ready for the trail. Already France Thebau, Palo Le Roc, and Henri Corlier were distributing to all rifles and ammunition, already Cleo and Marie and weak Marcel were marshalling the women into order, while others of the men made slings of blankets warped between long poles for the carrying of the sick. Haste bustled in every quarter, but capable, well-ordered haste, that soon brought all things into readiness. It was past noon, but Father Tenau allowed no time for a meal. They must go without food that day until night found them some distance away from desolate Lu Cerne. If the Indians should return, the inevitable sack of the post would keep them some hours at least.

So, within the hour, stood ready a long column, formed in marching order down the main way of the settlement, its men white faced and gaunt, its women weeping over its graves, with the Factor going here and there, thinking of the last things, apportioning the strongest to carry the slings, evening the burdens, adding to his own a bit here and a bit there from some weaker member, until with even his great strength he all but staggered under the load; and at one side there stood Father Tenau, reasoning gently with two women who shrieked and beat their hands, refusing to leave their cabins, for in one lay a child all but done of the sickness, while in the other a pale man breathed his last.

Here was such source as had given to the heart of the old priest in the long years its unmeasured goodness, to his voice its tenderness, and to his eyes their look of unshed tears. Father Tenau had lived to the dregs all life in the hard lives of his people.

Now he talked gently, he pled, and appealed to that stern justice that sacrifices the few to the many, the useless to the useful, which had its birth in the hazardous lives of the pioneers. But these two were women, a mother and a wife, and they knew no reason in their frenzy. Vainly he told them that their loved ones could live but a few

hours more and that that lean column was to march for its life, and that one useless burden might hamper it to its destruction. They wept and would not stir.

Then the old man resorted to his last resource.

He raised his hand, towering on high the symbol of his authority, and in a voice breaking with pity commanded them into the waiting column. It was as hard a duty as he had ever done, but with despairing cries those two women flung themselves in line, not daring to disobey the voice of the Holy Church.

All was then in readiness, and with the Factor behind his people, that he might be the last to march out of fallen Lu Cerne, Father Tenau at the column's head, and his silent monks marching at each side bearing much of its burden, the word was given and that little band moved forward, as pathetic a thing as ever crept back to the ways of civilisation from the merciless hands of the unconquered wilderness.

Palo Le Roc unbarred the big gate and stepped aside as the line passed out and his grave eyes fell with anguish on the face of Tessa looking up from her sling with his new-born babe on her breast. Truly life was demanding much of this people of the far places.

As the head of the column entered the aisle of the forest Father Tenau lifted his old voice in song. It was a brave chant of hope and victory, and the brown brothers took it up along the line. It drowned the weeping of the women and lifted the heads of the men, and it was their best protection.

Slowly they passed the portals of the post, two by two, and among those last to step beneath its giant beam were Marcel Roque, the bravery of her heart already shining on her face, and Lois Le Moyne, carrying in her arms the child.

Last of the line was McConnel, some time Factor of Fort Lu Cerne, grim and slow, who turned back at the very last and swept his eyes across the deserted settlement with a pathos in their depths which touched the heart of Palo Le Roc so that he moved ahead that none might witness that farewell.

As the Factor reached out to swing shut the useless great gate with its bravely studded breast, there was a sudden, sharp report of a rifle near in the edge of the forest and the man spun round, flung up the outstretched hand and dropped heavily.

At that shot every head turned, every tight-drawn nerve jumped with fear, but swiftest of all the girl Lois had whirled and seen it all. The

blood drained out of her cheeks, leaving them wan and white, and a strange expression settled in her eyes. Without a word she handed the child to Marcel, stepped out of the line and bent above him. Under her hand the heart still beat in his breast. A stentorian command from Father Tenau kept the wavering line in formation while he came hurrying back along it.

Lois straightened up and faced him. The priest knelt, examined the body, and rose firmly to his feet. He looked into the face of the girl and saw a thing which set his own. Here he wasted no persuasion.

"My daughter," he said sternly, "get into line. Move on," he cried ahead.

But Lois did not move.

She stood above McConnel, and strangely enough her eyes went to the face of Pierre Vernaise beside the litter of little Jaqua, just turned into the trail.

"I command you, Lois Le Moyne," said Father Tenau grimly, "to get into that column, in the name of the Holy Church." Then she looked into his poor face, drawn with pity and stern resolve, and made her answer.

"No, Father," she said, "I will not."

And every soul that heard the words knew that they were final, that she had defied the Church as

she had ever defied life, that still to the very end she was beyond the law.

And Father Tenau knew it. He wasted no more time. Ever the serving of the many in his hard creed of kindness.

So he lifted once more the blessed crucifix and over her bowed head pronounced the benediction. Then he gave his final command and walked sadly forward as the column wound into the opening. As the last turn hid the end, Marcel, blinded by her tears, looked back.

There by the post of the great gate she stood, the only conscious living being left behind, since France Thebau had quietly stuck his knife into the half-dead Blackfoot he found in the fringe of the woods whence had come that shot, the tall girl with her lifted face where warred the complex feelings of her nature, alone in the wilderness, and at her feet the man whom she had ruined even as he had ruined her, while beyond her spread the echoing desolation of the deserted settlement, whose people were gone like the chaff in the wind, whose doors stood open with none to enter, and whose dead lay unburied with naught between them and the pitiless sky but the slender hands of this lone young girl.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COMPELLING POWER

THUS destruction set its seal upon the once flourishing post of Fort Lu Cerne.

When Lois turned from the forest way where the last faint echo of the marching singers' chant had died in the distance, and looked back across it she met a sight that would have cowed a weaker spirit.

Smoke still ascended from the ruins of the three burned cabins and from the blackened opening in the wall. On every side sudden, unspeakable loneliness yawned from the open doors and windows, the signs of hasty flight lay everywhere. She alone of all human things remained, defying the wilderness and all it stood for, once again casting as a challenge to Fate that Life she so little valued, and behind it all lay that unconscious thing within her, forcing her irresistibly to each step in the strange weaving of her destiny, compelling her to a service which galled her very soul.

With a certain touch she turned upon its face the unconscious form of the Factor and examined it. The Blackfoot's bullet had entered just above

the right hip, passed directly across the small of the back, grazing the spine and coming smartly out above the left hip bone. The heavy body was helpless as a babe's. Without ado the girl set to practical work. Leaving him where he lay, she went back to Headquarters, secured a strong blanket from the storeroom, and returning rolled him upon it, spread flat upon the earth. Then gathering the two corners together, forming a sort of skid, she started up the road dragging her burden. He was a heavy man, squarely built and firmly set, and the flesh on his bones was solid, so that it was a heavy task. Many times she stopped, easing her hands, whose palms burned with the pulling, and by the time she reached the hard-beaten space before the blockhouse beaded sweat stood out on her forehead, trickling into the open neck of her dress. Up the step and over the sill was the hardest strain, for the inert body would sag and shake down, threatening to slip out of the blanket until she tied the lower ends. Once within the big room she spread a pallet from the furs in the corner and rolled him out upon it. Then she bared the wounds, which bled sluggishly, and bathed them with water from the hogsheads, finally tearing out the sleeve of her old print gown for compresses, a fresh wound needing an old washed fabric, and binding them in place with

a long linen towel found in McConnel's little living room.

Not a sign of consciousness lit up her face as she worked, touching this man's body as impartially as though he had been a child that was in need of help.

This done, she bathed the smoke and grime from his face, dampened the sandy shock of hair for coolness, and leaving him where the first soft wind of many weeks swept through the big room, set about the line of tasks which opened up before her.

First of these was a short journey through the gate in the pine partition that shut into his sanctuary the Factor's worn big desk. A slow crimson wave mounted into the thin cheeks as the girl passed within that enclosure.

Memory went swiftly back to a night in the early spring, a night which had begun with the soft awakening of a noble impulse within her breast, a tender thing, new and sweet and wonderful,—to end in black disgrace, in misunderstanding and accusation which seared to baleful ruins that wonderful new emotion, even in the unbearable ignominy of the guardhouse.

That memory scorched her yet like fire.

Beyond the desk, all but hidden by the protruding chink in the lower log, a small iron ring nestled

against the wall. Unhesitatingly she laid hold and lifted it. With unused creakings a small portion of the rude floor rose under her hand. Beneath yawned a dark opening,—an underground vault for possible use in warfare. Lois knew all about it. She laid the door back on the floor, and rising, went to the storeroom. From here she returned presently with her arms full of provisions, which she laid at the edge of the opening, going and coming until the pile grew waist high. Then she let herself down in the darkness and, reaching out, began to store away the pile at the edge of the hold. She, too, knew the nature of the red man, knew that as surely as the sun shone scouts would return to peep and pry and that when they carried to Tilligamok word of the post's desertion he would come back with his warriors to sack and pillage.

So she made trip after trip to the storeroom, working hard and fast, for she saw ahead a long way, providing, always, that soul and body be left together.

Meal and sugar and tea, salt and beans, she carried to cache in the hidden hold, and with each trip grew stronger within her the spirit of defiant force.

Never once did she glance at the unconscious form on the pallet of furs, but presently, as she

entered the big room with laden arms, something drew her look toward him, a feeling that compelled her, a strange, resistless force.

The Factor's stern blue glance was levelled upon her with questioning wonder. He saw the burden of her arms.

"Lois Le Moyne, what do you here?" he demanded sharply.

In that first moment of returning reason the later events were swept from his memory. He was once again the Factor, custodian of Headquarters, server of his Company, and here was this girl, this thief, once more within the sacred hold of that Company, still seeking its harm.

He started to rise in his sudden anger, but fell back upon the pallet with a look of dumb horror and unspeakable amaze spreading slowly across his features. Not a muscle had obeyed his will below his hips. The sturdy limbs in their ragged moccasins and dust-grimed leggings stretched heavily upon the skins, inert, deadly in their weight, without sensation. As the man became conscious of this he pushed himself up to a sitting posture and gazed at them in wonder and unbelief. With all his strength he tried to move one foot. The girl, watching him with narrowed lids, the old fury surging in her at his quick suspicion, saw the red blood purple his face, the veins stand out

on his short strong neck with the magnitude of the effort. For a breathless time he struggled, wildly, with all his great strength, in the doubled power of sudden fear, struggled as he had never struggled in all his strenuous life, for the small conquest of his own body, struggled and strained and fought,—and then, of a sudden, stopped. Stopped and dropped his hands on the floor beside him and lifted his eyes out the open door to where thin spirals of smoke went up to the cloudless sky, and the deserted post lay peacefully in the sun.

Memory had flashed back to his mind, dazed by its temporary eclipse, and he saw the past few days, the fight, everything up to that moment when he had reached out to close the great gate on the forsaken settlement and felt the sudden shock which preceded oblivion. But there he faced a blank.

Where was the column? How came he back in the post? Why was the strange girl, Lois Le Moyne, going across the big room with the Company stores in her arms? His slow wits floundered here.

He turned to her for answer, standing where his gaze had arrested her, and the puzzled scowl drew in his forehead.

“What does it mean?” he asked bluntly.

But with his' return to consciousness the impersonal element had faded from the situation. This was again McConnel, Factor of Fort Lu Cerne, grim and hard in his narrow creed of zeal, the man who had stricken in its one vulnerable spot her meagre life, dragged her high pride in the dust, dishonoured her in the face of the populace she had ever scorned, her one implacable enemy, and she raised her head and walked away without reply.

She laid her burden at the hold's edge and passed back along the room and out.

McConnel, helpless on the floor, gazed after her with pitiable incomprehension.

It was never for him, with his heavy mind, his straight reasoning, and his simple strength to read the swiftly changing soul, the many-sided spirit of mystery which drove to such widely separated points of action the girl whose body was worn with its resistless command. Now again she was obeying that spirit which, though it was facing annihilation for this man, yet could not bear his presence.

There was work outside Headquarters. Work that waited in those deserted cabins, ghastly work, terrible in its pathos, and she went wearily at it.

Once more she took up a blanket and in the silent heat of the burning afternoon, alone and

wishing for no help, she dragged, one by one, to the parched and yawning graves beside the church, those whose own had been forced to desert them in the hard crisis of existence.

But first of all, and with most tenderness, be it said of her, she served all that remained of Richard Sylvester, sliding the stiffened form from its blanket to the padded bottom with more gentle slowness than she wasted on the rest, and filling as softly as she could the shallow mound above him.

He had loved her and done her service. To the last she paid her debt.

When she had finished the last mound and stood up from her labour the sun was just falling, like a great burnished shield, below the dark rim of the forest.

She knelt beside her work and with her clasped hands hanging before her, lifted her weary face in the soft shadow of the coming twilight.

Aloud, and with infinite pathos, she repeated the stately service, her only auditors a loon trailing low across the post and that great infinitude bending above her in its unmatched beauty of delicate lights.

As she returned to the blockhouse in the silver and lilac of the evening she swept the aching desolation of the forsaken post with eyes too tired for sorrow.

Within, the man lay on the pallet of skins, silent in the deepening dusk.

He did not speak again. What Angus McConnel had read of a possible future in those solitary hours had been so bitter that he had no heart for speech, even though it had been another than Lois Le Moyne who brewed the steaming cup on the stove in his little room and presently held it to his lips in the darkness, silent herself, as sullen and at war with life as he.

So night closed down on all that was left of Lu Cerne, a night whose young moon picked out vaguely its pitiful vacant cabins, its open doors and windows and new mounds which held as one in their levelling power, Richard Sylvester, his short reign of authority done, trapper and child between, and Simple John, the idiot. And in the shadows of that night one more task waited the hands of Lois Le Moyne, who placed in the hidden hole a pile of the H. B. Co.'s furs to near the level of the floor, dragged the helpless form of the Factor through the little gate whence he had entered so often in the pride of his life, laid him along the edge and gently rolled him down on the giving couch, as soft and grateful as the bed of a king. The girl herself slipped down beside the pile carefully, lowered the heavy door, and going to a single skin in a corner of the vault threw herself

down in a bodily exhaustion so great that the world and all it held of tragedy, of wrong and passion and of misplaced love, were from that moment forgotten in a dreamless sleep.

Noise awoke her on the heavy floor above, feet that slipped and whispered in their deerskin moccasins, blows that spoke of falling things and the work of plunder. The Blackfeet had come back for pillage, as she had known they would. Within the hold, night still held its unbroken sway, though up above the golden light of a new day gilded the scene and the little winds that were of recent birth in the wilderness, tortured so long of the merciless heat, fanned softly beaded fringe and waving feather.

For two tense hours the pounding and dragging, the footsteps and the shouts kept up their bedlam in the big room and the store room, gradually lessening as one by one and two by two the warriors staggered away loaded to the skies on back and shoulder with all they could carry from the stores. It took them a full hour to depart entirely, with the uneasy return of this and that one more greedy than the rest to scan the sacked and emptied place for some treasure overlooked, and for another hour Lois lay in the dark and listened.

She heard no sound from the pile of skins be-

neath the trap, not the slightest rustle of a movement and during that tense and waiting hour a strange fear grew in her bosom, gripping her throat.

Presently she crept from her corner, feeling cautiously along the pile, and putting up her hands slowly lifted the door above. With the first small rift of light her eyes sought swiftly, not the space beyond, but the silent burden on the rude couch. They looked directly into the level eyes of McConnel and for that one instant they were off their guard, eager, fearful, yearning.

Then the old enmity swept back and she turned, pushing up the door to its full width, clambering out into the flooding light of the morning to stare around the familiar place. Chaos reigned supreme. Every nook and corner had been ransacked. Over the floor were scattered the papers from the open drawers of the desk, every box and bale had been upturned and in the far corner of the open space before the great fireplace where had been piled those hastily gathered gods of the deserted households in that first flight to Headquarters, lay a heterogeneous mass of scattered things where they had been kicked apart and such things taken as pleased the fancy of the marauders.

Lois remembered that she had noticed among them a flaxen haired doll brought from Henriette,

sad keepsake of a child asleep beside the church, whose mother could not give it up, and a carved crucifix belonging to Netta Baupre.

These were gone, along with Marie Mercier's brass candle sticks, while there remained the little iron pot of the Cree doctress, an old silver cup from across seas, and half hidden by a gaudy garment prized by some young girl, the worn little box with its clasp and hinges, the "chest" of Simple John.

The girl looked carefully around, out the open door, up and down among the cabins and, satisfied that now indeed they were deserted, set about her business of existence.

In the storeroom blank emptiness greeted her inquiry. Not a thing had been left of all the stores of the post. Tilligamok must have sent a swarm of carriers indeed. Broken boxes and torn papers, scattered cases and packing littered the floors and counters. The place was swept clean.

From here her search extended out among the cabins.

Whatever of provisions there had been left she would gather into her own small store. But here again the hand of the noble red man had been thrust in its thieving. The cabins were as clean as the blockhouse.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SERVICE OF UNWILLING HANDS

So Lois returned to the big echoing place in the soft gold of that day in the late summer and took up her most peculiar service.

With the aid of a strong plank laid across a chair and the braced-up trap door, she rigged a sling whereby McConnel might drag his helpless limbs up to the level of the floor, and with her shoulder beneath his knees she rolled him out into the blessed light, closed down the door, spread a wide bed of skins and the blankets she had stored and ensconced him in what comfort she could within his own office, whose commanding had been his great achievement.

When she straightened from the labour her face was flushed beneath its pallid thinness, her lips were shut and resentment flaunted in her eyes. Yet she moved all day in the ceaseless work of making habitable the empty place, straightening the disorder, heaping in a pile the scattered goods in the far corner and gathering up the papers to put them back in the desk.

All day the broken man on the pallet stared at the beams without speech and within the blue depths of his eyes the puzzled wonder at the ways of Fate had given place to such a mighty despair that the heavy face with its square-set jaw was a thing for pity.

In the little living room the girl set her hand to the cooking. Here she had stood and looked around, taking in with a keen glance the simple evidence of this man's way of life,—the bare furnishings, the cleanliness, the few worn books on the shelf. They were strangers to her, those books, and her fingers itched to touch them. They were not like anything she knew, odd volumes in foreign bindings whose possession had been the pride of that merry Scotch-Irishman who had left his mark on the wilderness in this Angus McConnel, loyal servant of the H. B. Company, some time Factor of the post of Fort Lu Cerne.

They bore no likeness to those books which Father Tenau had given her since the far day when he taught her her letters, a frowning, eager, whimsical child whose unfolding had been a delight to the old priest, but whose strange nature had drawn back from him when he could teach her no more.

So Lois read a little of the Factor's life from the place where he had lived and her fingers

trembled when she took up his utensils to cook his food for him.

No words passed between them when she served him his meal, McConnel raising himself on his elbow and accepting it without thanks, nor when she quietly dressed the small wound in either side, though when she rose and went away his eyes followed her, uncomprehending and at loss.

It was a queer bit of life that now had its beginning in the forsaken post, between these two, each of whom had played so harsh a part in the existence of the other.

Lois, burning with scorching shame at her servitude, yet powerless beneath its imperious demand, spent the days in an attendance meagre as she could make it, yet methodically sufficient. To every need of the silent figure on the pallet she gave punctilious heed, caring for the stricken body tirelessly, though to the spirit of the man within that body she was blind and deaf and dumb.

Never a word did her tight lips utter, never did her eyes encounter his in those short and glorious days that began to hang their banners of beauty around the stockade. With the quick change of seasons habitual to the Ragged Lands the pitiless heat began to give way as the copper hue died in the north and within three days the little winds took on a refreshing coolness that spoke of au-

tumn. At the end of the first week there came a night when the first breath of frost came out of the north and what of the foliage was left with sufficient life blushed faintly beneath its touch. The feel of fall was in the air and Lois, sitting in the big door, looked out across the loneliness and wondered.

Was it possible that but a matter of days back in the past there had been the bustle and feverish work of a settlement of human beings surging within that desolate circle? Utter silence and hushed waiting made the whisper of her moccasins on the blockhouse floor an appalling sound. Not a living thing but one had the Blackfeet left, a starved, forgotten kitten, one of the progeny of the only feline of the post, a striped beauty which Palo Le Roc had brought with much pains from Henriette the year before for Tessa. All else had the marauders taken, along with the lean bunch of cattle belonging to the Company. This pitiful thing had crept timorously after Lois, crying in fear, for there was not about the girl that winsome thing which speaks to animals the wordless language of love, and followed her to the big room from sheer need. But even the kitten had wronged her, for after her first grudging welcome of unfamiliarity she gathered the frail thing in her arms and fondled it. Now it crept in her lap as

she sat on the worn sill and sang a little song of cheer that somehow soothed the fretted soul within her.

She thought of that marching line with its sick and its mourners, its brave ones, such as Palo and Marcel and Cleo; its cowards,—Netta and Jaqua — its true and gentle ones,— Father Tenau and Pierre Vernaise. Ah, fine Pierre!— somewhere on the long hard trail to safety and a sigh of gladness swept her lips. So much that she cared for was in that column,—her two good friends and the wee child with his wistful eyes, the small Solierre.

Verily doth giving enrich the giver with love, even though it be such hardly acknowledged love as had its hidden seat in the breast of this Lois Le Moyne.

She stroked the sleeping kitten and watched the Indian summer light beaming goldenly on the dead stalks in Marcel's garden down the main way.

A soft blue haze, warm and tender as a fairy's dream, enveloped everything, softening the harshness of the heaps of black ashes which had been each a home, draping the old stockade standing in pitiful failure and seeming to apologise with every scar in its torn face, folding the deserted post in a loneliness yet greater than all.

As the cool of the evening came she still sat

in the door and once more the old questions had begun their tireless march through her mind. With the shadows she arose and went into the galling, self-enforced service of the man on the pallet.

As she passed through the darkening space without the rail toward the little room beyond, the despairing eyes on the floor of the sanctuary followed the outline of the high young head and torturing wonder of the truth awoke to gnaw at the vitals of Angus McConnel, as just as he was stern.

With the passing days the man began to find what liberty he was to be accorded at the hand of Destiny. The strength still remained to its full in his arms and hands and the whole upper part of his body, but from that chance wound above the hips downward all life had fled, it seemed. A dragging progress, slow and torturous, to the foot of the big desk was his utmost accomplishment, and here he laid his head against its face, being alone, and continued the fight within, the savage battle that would be neither lost nor won.

Silence held unbroken sway within Headquarters, silence tempered on one side with bitter feeling, on the other with slow, uneasy searching for a reason, illumined by doubt that had but now awakened, and which began to fill the mind of the Factor with anxiety. Which thing was, in these days, his greatest blessing, insomuch as it put aside for a

season the despair of his soul and body, and by the time the process had worked itself out he had other food for thought.

Lois almost forgot the sound of her own voice, speaking only when the kitten had followed her out among the cabins on some quest of wood for the gigantic fireplace, for the soft warmth of the short season of blue haze and dreams had given sudden place to frost of nights and the girl closed the big door and made the pallet of skins before the cheerful hearth. Cold winds began to shriek down from the north, tearing the faded leaves from the crowding giants of the forest and hurling them in floating billows across the palisade, to sweep and eddy around the empty cabins and pile in the unused doorways.

King Winter was sending his heralds before his face to shout his coming and already the few birds had flown to the south. In the Ragged Lands to the northeast the very spirit of the dead year held carnival in the racing winds howling across the shaking flats, the hurrying grey clouds that were mirrored in the bottomless black pools clinging to the edges of the quivering sun-baked stretches, in the fear-haunted desolation.

Far to the northwest the Crees had gone into their winter camps of banked tepees, save here and there a runner going on some errand to the

friendly Ojibways or the posts of the H. B. Company southward, but runner and courier avoided as the plague the sacked and pestilence-cleared post of Fort Lu Cerne.

So the girl and the man lived on their lives in which there was no good. Day by day Lois went in search of wood for the fire and she began to cook their food by the hearth that she might not make two fires. And presently she went a little way into the forest and set a trap that she had hidden with the provisions in the hold. When she visited it a day later there was naught but a snarling wolf, which she shot and left lying, not even taking the trouble to pelt, and set the trap in another place. She returned to the blockhouse with the old frown between her brows, for on the day preceding she had taken stock of the treasure of the cache and it had spoken a new word to her.

It was a smaller store than she had thought, an appallingly smaller store, and when she came up from its inspection her glance had travelled with swift unconsciousness to the quiet figure on the fur bed.

She had used prodigally of the provisions in an unacknowledged anxiety to feed him back to strength, not counting the cost, and now she wished bitterly that she had left the dead unburied that last day to serve the living better.

She had thought vaguely of the chance coming of trappers in the future, and later, of those who should come for their winter's debt at Fort Lu Cerne, but news travels swiftly in the wilderness and already the lone trappers and hunters from the upper regions were going into the far new post beyond, while those in the nearer reaches had made for Henriette. None visited the deserted place.

So the girl began to husband the stores in the hold. Faithfully she tended the trap, going farther and farther into the forest, but ill luck seemed to follow her. The beasts, like the humans, avoided the vicinity.

Day by day she spent out of doors, going around the post gathering wood, looking into this cabin and that, closing the useless doors and windows, walking here and there, her skirts and the loose wisps of her hair blowing in the wind which did not cease, and ever the kitten followed, frisking among the dead leaves, chasing them as they whirled down the open road. And after a while she set to work to rebuild the burned space in the stockade. It was but the matter of a whim, since the building was but a spider-web of such poles as she could handle, yet it healed the gaping wound in the wall and served to keep her out of the lonely room at Headquarters and the presence of him who spent the long hours looking into the fire,

or crawling painfully a little way and back to the pallet again.

Thus wore on the wild season of the fall, with silence and shrieking wind, one indicative of the human mood, warring, bitter, unforgiving, the other of the nature mood, revelling, hilarious, triumphant. The North was waking to its time of power. Down from the distant white circles of its mystic keep on every howling blast there rioted suggestions of its unmeasured forces waiting the moment to swoop down upon the land and do to the finest limit the cruelty of its will. To Lois the feeling of impending battle with the elements was as the smell of smoke to the war horse. It stirred to life some spark of joy amid the ashes of humiliation in her sullen soul. She sometimes opened the great gate and stood in the opening with her face lifted toward the North, drinking in the message of the fantastic blasts that tore and flirted by.

It seemed to her at such moments that they gave an answer to the unquiet questioning, a strong and mighty answer infinitely better than she had thought to find at the altar of the Blackfeet god, more fitting, finished and supreme.

She was kin to the wild wind herself, to the Spirit of the North that crouched and threatened beyond the grey horizon, to all things untram-

melled and whimsical which found no place among the humans by reason of their mystery.

Small indeed had been the place that she had found among her kind, a place that, since the passing of one year with its searing touch, had vanished utterly.

Sullen, fighting still against an unseen foe, weary, her very spirit cried out for the end,—the end that was not yet, but which beckoned with sedate and fitting gesture from that North which ever spoke to her, the great and warring North whose spawn, she said to her own soul, she was.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SINLESS THIEF OF FORT LU CERNE

ANGUS McCONNEL had lain all day before the mouthing fireplace, staring into the flames that had leaped under fresh fuel at the noon meal and fallen a little lower with each succeeding hour. Now the day and the flames were alike nearly gone. Through the window behind the big desk from whose vantage he had fired upon the crowd at the guardhouse door that spring day, there still came a dreary light from the grey skies, but within the big room there were shadows and darkened corners. Unspeakably lonely, charged with all eerie feelings, the forsaken place was fit only for bats and spirits.

To even the practical, heavy-souled man on the floor it bore a voice of desolation. Over and over he had traversed in thought every path and byway of the web of mistakes and happenings which had landed him here, at the edge of winter, in the empty seat of his authority, broken, helpless, his manhood shattered into nothing, a heavy burden on the shoulders of one who, less than all others in the world, should have stayed by him, that one

of all his people upon whom he had visited his judgment most harshly.

And why had she chosen to stay by him?

Frowningly he stared into the fire and pondered, as he had pondered all through the lonesome hours, the lonesome days and sometimes the lonesome nights when the ceaseless gnawing of the growing doubts would not let him sleep.

Why had this strange girl stayed by him, wounded unto death and helpless, her open enemy, her veritable foe in his zeal for right and justice as he saw it, when all those others had deemed him too great a risk to even take him for a way upon the trail, risking her all to save his life?

It was too great a problem for his plodding wits and he shook his head upon its pillow of rolled skins. The grey light faded from the window and a howling dusk closed down upon the wilderness. The fire burned lower and at last the back-log fell in two, sending up a flurry of sparks and a resurrection of flames that leaped in short-lived play. Suddenly he realised that it was night and the girl was not come in. The kitten cried without the closed door, its pitiful wail flying away on the splitting wind, and with a peculiar tightening at his heart the man raised himself on his hands and listened. There was no human sound in the riot of the wind outside. As he listened an un-

usual fear took hold upon him. Why did she not come? What had happened to her? She was as much a woodsman as any man born in the forest and knew its ways and its dangers, yet for the first time there seemed to come to him a sense of her womanhood, an odd, awakened sense, and fear took hold upon him.

Some compelling force within him prompted him to lift his voice and call her, yet in the act he faltered, stopped.

By what word should he call her?

He waited again, listening to the kitten and the night, fearful, filled with an unnamable dreariness, looking at the shadows by the door. Then,—

“Lois Le Moyne!” he cried above the wind, his voice startling him with its strangeness, “Lois Le Moyne!”

As if in answer to his call the kitten ran out into the night, its voice growing fainter as it was swallowed up in the blast, and presently the door opened and the girl came into the dusky room, the kitten crying and frisking at her feet. In one hand she carried a small animal. As she passed through the faint aura of light around the hearth McConnel saw that it was a snowshoe rabbit. With a wonderful relief he lay down upon the bed. She had been, he knew now, on some quest of traps, and he wondered about the reason,—

and winter was not far behind the howling wind, as attest the snowshoe rabbit.

Lois came and piled wood upon the fire-dogs, swung the crane that she had brought from Marcel's cabin across the flames, which merrily chased back to the dimmest corners the encroaching shadows, and spitted the game to bake.

Presently she served him such a repast as a king might envy of the crackling browned flesh, of tea and ash cakes, eating her own portion in silence as she sat on a stool by the warm hearth.

McConnel looked at her with a peculiar interest. Presently when she had carried away to the room beyond the tin plates and cups and was once more settled upon the stool with the kitten in her lap and her tired eyes on the flames, the man spoke, for the first time in all these days.

"Lois Le Moyne, why did you stay by me when I fell at the great gate?"

As if a hand had struck at her out of the shadows behind, the girl dodged forward and then sprang to her feet, one hand at her throat, the other clenched at her side. For one shaken moment her eyes leaped squarely to his and she stood at loss. Then the little line appeared at the corners of her flickering nostrils and the hand at her throat dropped.

"No business of yours, M'sieu,—the Factor

that was!" she said bitterly and dropped back upon the stool. The old rage was upon her with his startling question, so sharp in its probing, so unconscious in its slow and puzzled search for truths and reasons.

McConnel turned his worried eyes to the fire,—those sharp eyes that could gauge men after a manner, but could read no jot nor tittle of a woman, and after a while with a sigh he took his tired mind from the questions which seemed no nearer of solution than ever.

To one who has spent a long day pondering and watching the fire, one who can neither walk the floors nor look from its windows, that process is like to lose interest by night, the more so when one as puzzling and as much of a vague reproach as was this girl to McConnel sits in silent anger at the hearth.

Of a sudden a restless desire to get away from it all took possession of the man. He lifted himself on an elbow and looked around the room for something of another interest, and his eyes fell on the neat pile of those pitifully devastated treasures in the far corner. He would investigate them. That would be a diversion. So he started on his slow way, oblivious of the sight he presented, crawling like an animal with a broken back, slowly, painfully, pitiably. He had set his mind

on that pile in the corner. Therefore he would reach it,—in time, in his own time. All movement was painful, yet not so much so now as at the beginning. He resolutely took his mind off the girl and the stinging words of her answer. It had gone deep, that cut,—“The Factor that was.”

Slowly, a hand reach at a time he crept,—crept terribly to one watching,—toward the little mecca in the corner. Twice he stopped and rested. He had never known how long was that big room which he had trod so often with the swing of strength. Now it was a vast stretch of country to him,—upon the floor. He was going very slowly, and was near the corner, when there was a rush of feet behind and Lois flashed before him.

“What,—what is it, M’sieu,” she choked, “what is it that you want?”

McConnel looked up amazed.

“Something to look at from the pile,” he said simply, “something to look at,—the little box, I guess, the box with brass hinges.”

“Go back, I will bring it.”

Wondering, the Factor that was went slowly back to his island of the fur bed, while the girl stood looking down. She did not watch that progress.

When the ceasing of the swish of his garments on the floor told her it was done she picked up the little chest of Simple John and carried it to McConnel, who took it in his hands.

He recognised it then. Once he had seen the idiot sitting on the step of his cabin with this worn box on his knees, looking at some treasures it contained.

He held it a moment and deep in his nature some feeling of loyalty to the vague soul which had prized it suggested that he set it unopened upon the coals.

But quick on its heels came a counter impulse which seemed to say that it was right, eminently right, that he should open it.

He looked long at it, examining its smoothly fitted joinings, and noting its peculiar make, squat, solid, roomy, deciding that it was fashioned in some land across the seas, and by a careful hand. Upon the shiny brass of the hinges and the clasp there were faint etchings, in each instance the wings of a tiny windmill.

Some forebear of the mindless waif had, doubtless, come from Holland.

For a long time the man held the little chest and pondered, wondering of its history and of what pitiful treasures it might contain, and also of its weight, for it was very heavy. He set it down

beside him, and thought a moment of Simple John, vague, gentle spirit of the woods and winds.

Presently with a reverent touch he set his hands to the clasp and raised the lid. As he did so a strange thrill stirred him, as of some vast portent, a feeling that he stepped into the presence of some mighty truth.

Some faintly glimmering superstition of the Scottish Hills behind his own life stopped his hand a moment, but once again the impelling sense of right urged him on. He looked down upon the idiot's store of wealth.

Packed with neat precision, filling every half inch of its space, there lay a quaint assortment of widely differing articles. Rolled tightly across one end was a small packet of some black fabric. McConnel lifted it and shook it out,—the web-like length of a scarf of Spanish lace. From its folds there fell upon the pallet a bunch of gaudy artificial roses, entwined with tinsel such as flaunt a little hour in the bull-rings of the South, and they were streaked with some dark stain. Awed wonder held still the breath in McConnel's throat. A woman, and gallant deeds, and Simple John!

Beside these lay an English almanac with some foreign figures marked in ink across its margin, and next, packed between an ancient German Bible with a golden clasp and a heavy knife in a sheath,

there lay a wooden sabot of very small dimensions. Across the bottom, written in a prim and stately hand, were these words:

“This shoe was worn in her girlhood by
Hedwig Muer
The most dear and lovely wife of
Johan Blaatz.”

Spread beneath was a silken flag whose emblems McConnel did not know, and last thing upon it lay a buckled leather wristguard of such huge size that he who wore it must have been a mighty man. It was black and worn with service.

Musing, the Factor held it for a moment. In every keepsake save the flag and the almanac, spoke some personal remembrance. Perhaps some time in his unknown life, when the mind of him was that of a man, Simple John had had loves and friendships.

So, musing still, at last he laid down the trinket and was about to put back the contents of the chest when some thought to see if the folded flag was all made him lift it up. As its flattened folds came out McConnel peered beneath. The flag itself was but a bagatelle, only a thickness or two. The bulk was something else. He leaned down to see better its dingy surface, exactly fitting the

space it filled. The flame flared up as by intent and picked out plainly the last keepsake of the idiot who had loved, of all the post, only its Factor.

It was the lost book of accounts.

Thus had come, when it was over late, to the stern tribunal of his mistaken justice the sinless thief of Fort Lu Cerne, and it was not Lois Le Moyne.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SCORN OF EMPTY WORDS

THE stupendous meaning of the thing flared before the man like a light from Heaven, a light that scorched and burned, that searched to the very utmost the reaches of his soul and laid bare its weaknesses, its failures and its sins. Like pillars of fire in that blinding light three figures stood out in awful accusation,—Big Jean Mercier shot in his stubborn faith in his own infallibility, Richard Sylvester, whose authority he had defied, and most biting of all in its new revealing, Lois Le Moyne, whose very life he had blasted by his persecution.

He hung stupidly over the open chest with its scattered contents, the gaudy emblem still lifted in his raised hand, staring like one bereft of reason at the familiar volume.

Outside the wind tore at the squat structure and swept southward in majestic wrath and hurled the dead leaves fluttering against the panes.

On the hearth the flames leaped and crackled and now and then a coal dropped with its cloud of sparks, and still McConnel leaned on one hand and made no sound. He was reaching the bot-

tom of human punishment and he could not move to stop the awful sinking of his soul into perdition.

So long did the silence hold, the utter, breathless silence, that something in its quality touched the girl glowering at the fire with raging eyes, in which a deadly sickness of some other emotion struggled for mastery, and turned her of a sudden to look at him. The storming eyes dilated with a leaping fear.

The face of the man was ashen, the straight lips had fallen apart in helplessness, the eyes were wild. For one brief space she thought he had gone mad. Then her quick wits took in the box and the direction of his gaze and she knew it was something he beheld. With one swift spring she caught his shoulder, shaking him as one does a sleeper who walks.

"M'sieu!" she cried sharply. "M'sieu!"

The upraised hand fell slowly. Slowly, with an effort, he raised his eyes, still stupid with concentration. His lips opened without sound. Then he said hoarsely:

"The book,—I have found,—the book,—of accounts."

Lois Le Moyne dropped her hand from his shoulder and stood up. She drew her body to its full height and lifted her head. She felt as if

the breath was gone from her lungs and the shadowy room swam before her sight.

Without a word she went from him to the little room beyond, and all the short journey her heart seemed bursting. She did not look back, but left him to face the night with his discovery, his memory, and his punishment.

And what that night held for the man, strong, earnest, plodding, with his simple sense of right and justice, his stern uprightness, and his crumbling structure of self-faith, none would ever know.

When morning came she found him before the dead hearth, lying amid the scattered trinkets with his head fallen forward on his crossed arms where sleep had overtaken him at last, and the lines in his face were deep and cruel.

That day he lay face down upon his bed and would not eat. He shook his head when Lois offered food, and she, setting it down beside him, found it untouched when she came in from out of doors.

Only the kitten felt any touch of joy, frisking playfully about and striving to win to a tiny brightness these dreary mortals.

Surely, thought the girl, this thing Life was the sorriest tangle of all created things. Never would the crossed threads come straight,—nowhere was there an end of peace.

When night again found Lois upon her accustomed stool by the leaping fire McConnel lifted his haggard features and looked at her.

Her glance fell to the kitten at her feet, sullenly, resentfully, with some whimsical anger. But she thrilled despite herself when he spoke.

"Lois Le Moyne," he said steadily, "I have done you a great wrong,—it has been the heaviest sin of my life,—and I ask you before God to forgive it."

Beneath his glance, humble, suffering, untempered with self-mercy, she felt the hot blood surge upward to the temples.

"To those others whom I unjustly punished in my hardness I cannot make amends, for, Heaven help me! they are dead! But to you I would acknowledge my sin and do what there is left of right. I would have your words of pardon and then that you go and leave me before the snows come down."

He waited, slow, heavy man, with pathetic eagerness for her answer.

And in a flash of the old lawless spirit of vengeful fury it came, came with a rush of biting words, while the wind shrieked outside now more bitter and tumultuous.

"Nom de Dieu!" she cried springing to her feet. "Forgive! Forgive that spring, the drag-

ging down the main way,—the hand of the law that threw me in where the men talked! Forgive the guardhouse and the summer, the shame and the whispers? Merci of God! The Factor—that—was—is modest in his demands!”

For a moment she stood quivering,—opening her lips for more, and of a sudden closed them upon the flaying tongue, dropped back upon the stool and was silent.

At every word the man waiting, raised on his hands, shrank and cowered as if from a stinging stroke. The anguish of his eyes deepened with each bald truth, and when she ceased he sank down on the pallet.

After a while he spoke what seemed like to be the last word between them.

“There remains no more. To-morrow you will start for Henriette.”

Instantly she flared reply.

“It is not for you to command in Fort Lu Cerne. I stay. But I want no words, empty as the flying wind.”

To the other things that went to form her towering score against this man had been added, at last, colossal scorn. Never while life was in her body would she have asked for pardon of a foe, no matter what of wrong lay between them of her making. As incomprehensible to her as she to

him was that alien sense of justice which could so humble him to the seeking of peace before the end.

To her hatred of him was added contempt.

While this thing passed between the man and woman inside the blockhouse another was happening without.

Above the vast bed of the tossing top of the forest the shrieking wind stayed its steps a moment here and there, as if listening for some sound from out the inky north, some faint forerunner of a coming Presence, to tear away again, and again to stop and listen. And presently it ceased its riot of wildness, breaking forth for a last fling, to settle quietly, to stand aside as it were, while its Master passed across the world. The little sound had come out of the north, a soft little sound, like the swish of a silken garment adown the steps of a marble throne, a sound that began to whisper to the naked trees, to swish and whisper into every unguarded way of the forest, until all the vast aisles of the great cathedral of the wilderness sang and rustled with its tiny voice, a low, fine voice, small, insistent, all-pervading.

The King was passing down upon the world. Winter had come in the Ragged Lands.

When Lois, roused out of herself by the new

note in the voice of the elements with the quickness of the woodsman, raised her eyes to the window beyond the sanctuary, the night was white against the pane.

The Long Snows had arrived.

Dawn of day found the world as white as the gates of Heaven, a silver veil hiding it from any sight but the nearest, and piercing cold, fulfilling the promise of the wind. Against the cabin the falling flakes were already piling at the north, the windows were half covered and the trees without the wall were hoary monsters of the forest. Lois, wrapped in a man's blanket coat, its bars bright across her shoulders, went early to the place where she had set the trap. She dug it out from its bed of snow, still set and empty.

Verily luck-of-the-world was against her.

All that day the snow fell steadily, and the next and the next, piling up and up, softening the outlines of all unsightly things until Fort Lu Cerne hid its gaunt skeleton beneath the mantle of royal ermine.

For another day the little flakes rustled through the bare branches of the trees and then they ceased. It was indeed a new world that confronted the lonely two in the blockhouse, a white world of mystery and silence, a silence so deep that one instinctively paused and listened for the

sound that seemed ever on the point of breaking out of the illimitable stretches of space.

To the girl standing on the step before the closed door of Headquarters it brought a sombre sense of peace, that great white silence, a peace that seemed the end of many things, that beckoned from the future wherein there was no good and offered rest from the surging soul which drove and mastered her. Verily she was glad of the snows.

During the week that followed Lois ate lightly herself of the provisions in the hold, though those portions served out to McConnel were still unstinted. It was that week which saw the death of her last hope of succour from the outside. She began to realise that no trapper would come to Fort Lu Cerne until spring and the power of the H. B. Co. had reinstated it, swept and garnished and garrisoned. Pictures began to form in the leaping flames as she scowled at them in the long evenings, pictures which had to do with that constantly diminishing small store beneath the trap door, with the failing trap outside the wall and with the long winter and they two human souls locked in the forsaken post by the relentless hand of the cold. They were pictures heavy with shadows.

Again in a day or two the snow fell and Lois

piled the fire-dogs high. She did not go out so much now, but busied herself about the empty place, and the man on the floor took to watching her covertly. She was good to watch, this girl with her shining black head who carried herself like a princess, and it was of a surety the pride of a princess which gloomed from her face. From the depths of his anguish McConnel began to see her with new eyes. She was innocent, as innocent as the unconscious kitten frisking on the hearth, and yet she had borne in the face of all Lu Cerne the brand of thief pressed to the cringing flesh by his hand,—his hand who now lay at her feet a helpless burden, a grave menace of her very life, and she had accepted that burden, nay, had taken it upon herself voluntarily and in so doing had sacrificed her chance of safety,—more, her half name of decency among her kind, which was her last possession.

These new thoughts, coming slowly to his mind, opening in the light of events like a flower, filled McConnel with unbearable pain. He had wronged her unspeakably, yet she served him. He had humbled himself to the earth in his contrition, yet she scorned him.

What he could do he did not know. There seemed no way in which he might atone, even though he had been a man and not this crawling

thing of horror which he was. The look of his face these days was a sight for tears, so drawn and pitiable was it.

And on a day when the grey clouds swung low across the post and the very spirit of desolation was abroad in the aching stillness the thought found expression in words.

The girl had stood long at the high window that faced the guardhouse, looking out at the frost-bound scene. Presently she pushed up the hair on her brow with a swift and nervous motion and turned away, crossing out from the office to put more wood on the fire.

As she passed the fur bed Angus McConnel reached out and caught the skirt of her gown, ragged now and not warm enough for the winter cold.

His honest eyes were sick with his trouble as he looked into her startled face.

"Lassie," he said thickly, reverting as he did ever in moments of strong feeling to his mother tongue, "Lassie, why dinna ye gang?"

But Lois pulled her skirt away and passed on, vouchsafing no answer.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SECRET OF THE SANCTUARY

THAT great North whose hand is all powerful beyond an imaginary line along the earth now took hold of the wilderness. As if a mighty, all covering screw had settled down upon the world, the pressure of the cold advanced. Steadily, resistlessly, unrelentingly it pressed down upon creation until it seemed that life could bear no more, and still the cold grew in intensity, in cast iron hardness, in that gripping strength which takes the live thing and slowly presses out of it the warmth, the flexibility, leaving it at last a rigid element of itself. The riotous wind no longer howled. It was dead still and cold.

Higher and higher Lois kept the fire leaping on the hearth while she began what seemed to McConnel a mysterious task. Out from those furs still in the hold and not needed for his heaped bed before the fire, she brought one day two fine bear skins and spread them out upon the floor. With her hunting knife she trimmed them ruthlessly, cutting with deft certainty, until there emerged from each a strip some three feet wide

and nearly six in length. These she rolled together and laid aside, setting to upon a soft white deerhide, which she converted into a little pile of thongs which curled down beside her as she worked, and among whose creamy tangle the kitten rolled and kicked with wild delight. These things being done, there came a time of work for Lois, sitting now all the hours of the day as well as those of the evening beside the hearth, sewing deftly, making small slits in the edges of the heavy robes and lacing them together with the deerhide thongs. When at last, after two days, she was done of the task there lay at her feet a long sack of the length and width of a man, tight and impervious to the biting cold, warm with the softness of long fur inside. With a reckless hand she went among the remaining pelts of the company, cutting and lacing, and presently there emerged from her labour rude garments for herself, a shaggy *cuddy-sark* and, after a fashion, a coat-like thing which was mightily effective. These things she piled in a corner. Then from the rafters of the little living room beyond she brought a pair of snowshoes, McConnel's own, stored from the previous year and unwanted of the Blackfeet, and set to work mending a break in the web of one.

McConnel watched her wonderingly.

It was plain she made ready for a journey and

the man hoped earnestly that she was about to act in accordance with his last command. She vouchsafed no word of explanation and he could but draw his own conclusions. True, it was a terrible trip down the long trail in winter, even when one had dogs and a light sledge, but the girl was strong and of the wisdom of a man, and he knew that she would make it.

With her going toward safety and humankind would go also some of the heavy load of remorse which burdened his shoulders. Of what would become of him he did not think nor care.

Day by day the girl worked on. When the garments were completed and the great racquet-shaped shoes, made after the Ojibway pattern, were stood, ready, against the wall, she began to make something out of the heaviest strips of bear-hide, a peculiar harness, well padded and sewed, and she calmly fitted the thing upon her own shoulders.

The Factor watched and frowned.

What now brewed in the mind of this strange creature?

When the harness was finished she took it and went outside, though seeming to go no farther than the step of the big door, coming back as if satisfied about something.

In truth that was as far as Lois went. By the

step, weather-worn and grey against the snow, there rode on its steel runners the small dog sledge of Palo Le Roc which she had found behind his cabin. She stood before it, measuring, fitting, adjusting, and the process seemed satisfactory.

This was on a day when the snow had ceased for forty-eight hours and the cold rose in its tension as the note of an engine rises in tone, settling and hardening the surface of the level white pack. Lois looked around at the frozen landscape and nodded to herself. It was good. She had seen this day from the beginning and had waited for it. The waiting had been perilously long, too. Only she knew how small was that last store in the hold, so small that it was but meagrely adapted for a journey,—a slow journey,—down the long trail to civilisation. It was urgent time to start with the gaunt face of starvation peering around the corner of the future. So now she went back in the big room to make preparation for the morrow. In her accustomed silence she served the slender meal from the vantage of the hearth. Afterward she came and stood for a moment beside McConnell lying on his pallet.

“M’sieu,” she said, “what of the papers in the desk would you have go down to Henriette?”

The Factor looked up with a sudden thrill gripping his soul, a complex sensation which he could

not have analysed, a mingled sense of joy and relief through which leaped a fire-like shot of pain.

She was going at last!

Some little of each emotion quivered in his voice as he replied.

"The two — books of account," he said, "and the contract of Corlier. That of France Thebau,—— But I will see."

He drew himself up on his hands and started on one of those unsightly journeys across the open space, through the little gate and into the sanctuary of his office.

Beside the desk he stopped, looking up, his leonine head not on a level with its surface. The girl had followed, her eyes on the floor just short of the crawling form.

Now she drew out the drawers and held them down, one by one, that he might overlook their contents.

"No," said the man, "there is missing one paper. Did the Blackfeet take, think you, any of these things?" He looked up straight in Lois' face.

"None, I think, M'sieu," she answered, "they but scattered them abroad in the room."

"Then it must be here. It fell, most like, behind the desk. We will move it out from the partition. If you would take hold of the cor-

ner,——” The slow blood rose in McConnel’s haggard face at his helplessness and he waited, looking down at the floor in the shame of a man who must ask for strength from a woman. But he waited in vain. The girl did not move. Presently he lifted his eyes to see the reason, sinking yet lower in that shame since it was refused.

She stood rigid beside the desk, and *her* face was white.

“It is not there, M’sieu, the paper,” she said, “it must be in some corner that you passed.”

“Some place I passed? No. There is no other lurking place. Will you move the desk, Lois Le Moyne?” There was something in the girl’s tone which roused once more the last faint spark of dominance left in the crushed nature of the man.

“No, M’sieu,” she said sharply.

“Then stand aside,” he cried tremulously.

With all the strength of his half-strong body the Factor leaned his shoulder to the task and strove to move the desk, the one-time badge of his authority, but a man upon the floor who cannot move his limbs is an eliminated element on the plane of achievement. The sight of him at his futile effort was a tearing thing. The girl, standing back as he had bidden her, involuntarily obeying that command, put a hand to her throat

as if it choked her. Straining every nerve, he endeavoured to push the heavy thing aside, but he had no purchase and it merely creaked a little resisting. The blood poured into his face and the veins stood out on his neck. It was the last effort of the old spirit of physical compelling and his very soul stood out on his features, despairing as he failed.

Suddenly, as she had rushed in her anger to get the little chest for him, Lois sprang forward and caught the corner.

"Fool!" she cried aloud, and she apostrophised herself, "Fool of the world! There!"

With one sweep of her strong young arms she dragged the desk forward, rasping on the floor.

As she did so there fell from behind it, not the lost paper, but, tumbling into McConnel's very hands, two moccasins of the measure of a man's foot and they were fashioned with most cunning craft of the smoked buckskin, velvet soft, the turned-down flaps were of doeskin, white as a lady's hand, and on the toes, heavy with bead-work, there glowed and sparkled the quaint designs and figures whose intricate weaving was known to but one hand in the wilderness, that of Lois Le Moyne, the sign manual of her handicraft, which one, seeing, could never afterward mistake.

They fell before him and he took them up, stupidly, wonderingly, and looked long at their perfect beauty. As he turned them over, under each flap on the inside there stood out, done in green and scarlet beads, the initial letters of his own name,—A. M.

In the moment that followed, the slow mind of Angus McConnel learned its greatest and its swiftest lesson of life and its mysterious ways.

For once it conjured before his eyes the right thing at the right time,—he saw a soft night in the early spring, and bending over this very desk the slender figure of a young girl, whom he, in his blundering, caught without grace and hauled out to public punishment, branding her as thief, and whom he had ruined in the eyes of the populace.

These things he saw as he leaned stupidly on one hand, holding in the other the gift that she had dropped hurriedly, at his approach, *behind* the desk instead of *upon* it, lacking at that moment the daring which had prompted its conception.

Dimly through his heaped anguish, Angus McConnel began to read a page, the wonder of which was the crowning thorn of his abasement.

When he raised his eyes to her at last, they were stricken as with death.

“Lois Le Moyne,” he said, “I——”

Then he crumpled forward and with the gaudy trinkets still in his hand, he laid his shaggy head upon them, while his shoulders shook with dry and awful sobs.

Lois stood still, with her hands clenched at her sides and the white line at the base of the fluttering nostrils. She had reverted suddenly to that mother whom none but Old Jaques had ever known.

By her own hand, voluntarily, yet compelled by some primal lure before whose drawing power she was helpless, she had betrayed herself.

Already the spell of it was passing. The old, raging, uncontrollable anger was rising like a tide within her. Its vibration quivered in her tones.

“A trifle, M’sieu,” she said, and every word bit like a blade, “a bagatelle,—droll memory of one untaught fool who looked for the eagle but to find the crow.”

The crushed and broken spirit of the man at her feet shrank yet lower in its shame.

In him she had sought the eagle, daring the populace by an open act of preference as no woman in all the world beside would have done, matching him in her peculiar soul, strength for strength, daring for daring, silence for silence, and honour for honour,—selecting him with simple

bravery, and this frank gift, marked with her open sign, had been her guerdon:

And he:——

He had done her to death for her grandeur.

As he cowered there in his abasement he saw it all,— every event of the long chain whose links had filled the year,— saw it all, and now with the scales fallen from his stupid eyes, each smallest thing was clear.

To him who, all his plodding life, had beheld womanhood as an abstract thing, her womanhood now leaped out with startling distinctness. He saw so much that he covered his eyes and cried out for sparing of the revelation. The sight was too condemning — he could not bear it.

Eagle! He had indeed been as the crow in his unspeakable baseness.

And for recompense now at the end he stood between her and safety, a miserable reminder of what a man can do to a woman's faith. He had ruined her as utterly as might be in all the posts and settlements, as far as the tale might go.

The count was too long and too uneven. He was a man of the wilderness and the evening of all scores, there, is death. He could never bear the sight of the day nor the contemplation of his soul when this girl had passed for the last time beyond the portal of the deserted place. There

was but one ending for so sorry a web of failures.

With a swift motion he raised himself high on his arms and swept the long hunting-knife from its loop at her belt.

Quick as light the girl caught the descending wrist and threw her body forward. In a tumbled heap they went down together on the floor, but when Lois arose, flushed and breathing hard, she held the knife. She stepped out of reach and slipped it back in place.

"A coward, too, M'sieu!" she said.

McConnel rolled over beside the desk with his arm across his face.

The grey of day had given place to the dusk of night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DOWN THE LONG TRAIL

BEFORE the grudging light again peeped in the windows of the blockhouse, Lois Le Moyne touched the Factor on the shoulder where he slept.

"Come, M'sieu," she said briefly, "there is work."

She brought his meagre meal and went about strange preparations while he ate.

A fire roared on the hearth and the kitten frisked about in the flame-lit shadows. By the big door lay a neat, tight pack and tied to it were those few utensils which one takes upon the trail, a pan from the room beyond, the coffee pot and two tin cups. Beside the pack lay the long skin bag which Lois had made. McConnel lifted his eyes only for swift glances, but these things he saw with amaze. He saw also that she wore the shaggy garments of skin as protection from the cold.

She was ready for the trail. It did not take her long to complete her meagre arrangements,—the closing of the door between the big room and

the small one after a glance around the neat interior, the closing of an open drawer or two in the big desk, the brushing back of the venturesome coals on the hearth. It looked as if the place were being made ready for complete desertion. McConnel sat on the pallet and the heart of him rose higher and higher in his throat with each lessening task, and the slip of the girl's new moccasins on the floor made him weak with anguish. He dreaded each moment.

Would she say aught to him before she left? Or would she just go in that maddening silence, without a word, a look? Just open the big door and step out,—go away with the lessening sounds of her going coming back for a moment or two? The man clenched the hands at his sides and shut his teeth on the cry that was near his lips.

Yet what else?

More like she would mock him as she went. It would be but fitting.

And yet—"Oh, Mother Mary," his soul cried out in agony, "guard her and, aye, keep her safe frae harm!" in which mixed speech spoke his wilderness mother and his Scottish father, while his slow heart wept, "Oh, Lassie! Lassie!"

"Come, M'sieu," said the cold voice of the girl herself, "it is but a short journey to the door. We must have a good start."

"Eh?" he said, bewildered.

"The dog sledge waits. Come to the step."

Then he knew. The bag — the two cups — the pack — but where had she gotten dogs?

The lean team of Palo Le Roc had trotted, howling, after the marching column and he had never heard a dog cry in the post in these long days of loneliness.

But she intended to take him. That thought came flooding over him with heavy rapture. Then in her heart there must be thought of forgiveness. The haggard lines softened out of his face and he lifted it to her with the first look of directness.

The gladness was pitiable, the eager look of a dog, whipped by its master, when that master deigns to speak to it.

"You would take me, too?" he asked simply.

"Of a surety," said Lois, "how else, M'sieu?"

"Then you will some day forgive me," said Angus McConnel, "and that is my last hope."

He looked long at her face in the dancing light, fixing its every feature on the page of his memory. It was a wonderful face and he had helped in its carving.

As he made no move the girl shifted restlessly.

"Come," she said, "the day will soon be here."

But McConnel folded his useless arms.

"Long enough have I been the burden of your life, Lois Le Moyne," he said with a quiet dignity, "now I go out of it. The trail in winter is of sufficient hazard for one, light running and unhampered. I remain in Fort Lu Cerne."

Patiently Lois spoke, almost, for her, gently.

"If you stay, I stay. Yonder by the door is the measure of our stores, a piece of salted flesh, a little sugar and coffee, a few beans, perhaps a potful, a scant supply of meal and two cans of meat from Henriette. How long, think you, M'sieu, will they last? I have gauged things well. It is enough to take us down the trail — and the sledge waits."

The tone was as calm and as final as his own had been. He knew she meant every word.

"Which is the better way, M'sieu?"

Once more the man fell before her strength.

"That," he said, "I will go." Without another word he started, crawling from the fur bed, toward the door. On the way he stopped a moment.

"Where did you get the dogs?" he asked.

Lois was catching the frisking kitten and did not speak.

She came to his side and opened the door. Outside the sparkling cold of the night was as diamond powder and breath of ice. The great stars

were close and fairly crackled in their brilliancy. To the north a ribbon of the Northern Lights waved and whimpered across the blue-black dome of the sky. In the glow from the snow the man looked eagerly out for the dogs that should be fidgeting and snarling. He leaned forward on his hands. There was nothing before the step but the grey skeleton of the sledge, with a heap of heavy harness lying in front.

Lois stepped out and laid upon it, well padded with furs, the long bag, turning down a flap at the top.

"Now, M'sieu," she said.

McConnel drew back aghast.

"You would draw the sledge?" he whispered.

"There is naught else. Come."

As one in a dream he shook his head.

"Shall we go back and wait for starvation, M'sieu?" The cold voice whipped him up.

With her bodily help he dragged himself up on the sledge, together they worked the helpless limbs down into the warm covering of the bag which Lois fitted carefully about his shoulders. Then she went back and brought a woollen scarf from the heap in the corner and bound it tight around his head. Under it all the man's mouth was tight and he was physically sick. The girl herself was well wrapped against the pressing cold.

When all was in readiness she gave McConnel the kitten down in the covering, closed the big door, sat down on the step and laced on the snowshoes, stood up, and then picking up the harness she had made with such pains slipped into it, buckled it across her breast, leaned into the shoulder straps to test their set and, stopping a moment, looked all around the post. At the corner of the little church, dim and indistinct in the darkness, her eyes lingered longest. She was taking a long farewell of the tiny old man who slept there.

Now she served another and it was for the same reason.

Without a word the girl leaned forward, in earnest now, the new harness creaked, stretched, held firm, the light sledge on its steel-shod runners started, slid lightly forward following, and Lois Le Moyne went forward with the long swing of the snowshoer, bound for the far city of civilisation, the southern post of Henriette.

Down the main way they went, between the pathetic cabins, eerie in their vacancy, to the great gate in the eastern wall. In silence she let down the bars, drew through, and turning shut the gate again. Then without backward glance or visible emotion, in the singing cold that rang from the runners, these two whose lives were so strangely

knit together, struck into the broad trail and were swallowed up in the forest.

It was a strange picture they made,—the bundled figure on the sledge, the girl far ahead to give unhindered sweep to the long snowshoes, bending forward as she swept easily along. Within the forest there was no reflection from the snow. The cold and the darkness were intense. By that unerring instinct which made her as a man in the great woods she followed the broad trail. The pressing cold bit at her face and tingled her fingers in the fur mittens. But for Lois that journey, terrible as it must be in point of hardship, of endurance and unending struggle, was to be as nothing compared to what it meant to the man on the sledge behind.

The day at last crept in among the frost-bound bolls finding them far in the white waste of the wilderness. At mid-day they stopped and Lois made a fire from rotten pith chopped from a leaning trunk and gathered twigs. Across the front of the sledge was bound her rifle and at her belt hung the short hand axe and her hunting knife. These things were imperative on the trail. One can dispense with food and drink, but these weapons never. She made coffee and fried a bit of the salt meat in the pan, serving McConnel in silence. The kitten she let out of the warm depths of the

covering to frisk and leap with every hair on its diminutive body standing up, pricking with the cold.

They made short stay, only to catch the kitten again and bind the pot and cups to the pack behind McConnel. Then they started on. Behind them the tiny fire sent up its thin spiral into the dry cold air, an unspeakably lonely sight as they went away and left it.

At night they made camp at the foot of a giant hemlock. After lighting the fire again Lois went into the woods, with the kitten tearing along on the hard snow, and presently returned with a heaping armful of the soft fir boughs, which she spread beside the fire, making a perfect couch. After the meal of hot coffee and meal cakes cooked frankly in the coals, she spread upon the boughs a skin from the sledge and rolled McConnel upon it, wrapping him tight. He spoke for the first time since they had been on the way.

"Let me sleep on the sledge? It is comfortable,—take you the fir boughs."

But Lois worked on swiftly.

"There are more fir boughs," she said.

Before the light went entirely she had gathered a huge pile of branches, made another couch of the boughs across the fire, spread down the remaining skins, laid the rifle beside her, gathered the kitten

in with her and rolled down to that heavy sleep of the body worn to utter fatigue. In a few moments she was lost to all the world, while the fire died and the cold, pushed back for a little time by the heat, crept in, pressed down with its insidious force and sought with prying fingers for the living things beneath the skins.

It rimmed the edges with ice where the breath steamed and felt of every loose end of the covering. And when its prying became too insistent, Lois roused and reached for more wood, sending the fire leaping again, to drop back again into dreamless slumber. But Angus McConnel, sometime Factor of Fort Lu Cerne and a man, now less than both by the measure of all distance, did not close his eyes, gazing into the crackling cold of the darkness and praying miserably for death.

Thus went their days.

Hour by hour they fought the pressing frost. In the early mornings it seemed that they would inevitably fail, for then the odds were greatest. It covered the land as with a tangible garment—the merciless cold—a thin blue garment of ice shadows that spread around and ahead as far as one might see among the giant trees. The stinging air, still as death, danced with fine powder of the frost. Then they struggled on with renewed vigour, Lois

at her task of muscle, McConnel at his task of mind, each striving to do the best.

By noon the distant light of the sun, hidden somewhere behind the lowering clouds that never left the roof of the forest, would send a grudging warmth to temper the gripping cold which lasted for a few hours until the short day turned toward its closing, when the lessened pressure returned, increasing as night came on.

Day by day they went forward, silent, miserable, fighting their common enemy.

Day by day as she swung ahead the mind of Lois began to be busy with the old problems, the ceaseless questions. Day by day as the trail slipped behind her and Henriette drew nearer in the future she cast over the years of her short life. What had she gained of the world? Verily less than nothing. And what had the world gained of her?

The score was even. Yet now it swung, with every day's travel, nearer to that point where it was to change, where the balance would at last hang heavy with Life's debt to her. She did now a thing whereof she could say to her soul, "This thou hast done out of that scant goodness where-with thou wert dowered, without hope of reward, one noble deed unsullied with selfish thought, performing for thyself a sacrifice to go before thee at

the end, a sacrifice at last worthy." And wearily she turned her eyes to the Great North whose mystic voice called to the deep of that soul, called with a strong insistence which breathed of rest and peace and of oblivion. She longed with a great sickness for the journey's end which must come first. So she bent to her task feverishly, summoning all the strength of her body, rising early that the days might be long, pressing on toward the end, and day by day the weariness grew heavier in her heart.

The mystery of life was still unsolved for her, still thronging her mind with its useless questions, and she longed sorrily for peace.

Thus they went down the long trail, these two, warring with life and destiny, still lost in the meshes of that great web of mistakes which they themselves had woven.

CHAPTER XXIX

HENRIETTE

SAFETY, and peace, and rest! Thus went up the prayers of thanksgiving from that worn band of people, carrying their sick and their memories, which marched one day into the strong post of Henriette with its gaiety, its civilisation, and its ways of the world.

At that column's head still had walked the upright figure of the old priest, his lean face a light of hope before his people, his strong heart still courageous. At his side was Palo Le Roc, keeping watch over Tessa, while behind them came Pierre Vernaise in tenderness supporting the feeble steps of little Jaqua, returned from the land of shadows, and his fine young face was illumined by some inward fire which had its lighting at an altar forsworn in the wilderness. Cleo was there, and Marie, and France Thebau, Old Blanc Corlier, Marc Baupre and Netta, young Henri and his wife, all those who had marched away from the doomed post of Fort Lu Cerne, save one who slept in a lone grave far back on the long trail,—that

brown server of an alien race, the doctress of the Crees.

And chief of those whose worth was proven on that forced and dreary journey was Marcel Roque, her comely face saddened by the hand of life, her tender eyes shining with its teachings, carrying in her arms, strong once more, the wee, misshapen child, unscathed by harm.

Thus they came out of the darkened valley of danger and death and suffering into the high hills of hope and happiness. And all raised their songs of thanksgiving, though two there were who bowed their souls in supplication for that tragic figure left standing alone by the stockade of the deserted post. Two there were who did not forget,— Pierre, who had renounced her as a saint to Heaven and to Destiny,— Marcel, who watched, unceasing, from the north wall of the great settlement, firm in her courage and her hope.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PRIMAL LURE

THE day drew to a close. The grey clouds hanging low against the white earth shut in the world. The cold pressed down harder and harder as the shadows of night drifted like smoke among the sleeping gaints of the forests.

Dreariness and desolation seemed to speak in the very voices of the crackling frost and all life seemed at a standstill.

Down the broad trail to Henriette and but an hour's distance from its gates two dark figures stood out against the grey background of the snow,—a tall figure that leaned into the shoulder harness of the sledge, staggering wearily, and another that leaned forward on the sledge behind with a sympathy so intense that its lips opened with every rasping breath which came from the other.

"Lassie," cried the man at last, his voice rising with the strain of feeling, "for God's sake, stop!"

His lips quivered and his helpless hands were doubled into iron fists outside the covering. His

heart seemed breaking with the agony. If she could bear more, he could not.

"Stop!" he commanded hoarsely.

As if unconsciously obeying, the girl stopped in her tracks. As she lifted her face it shone grey as the grey light around them. She stood breathing heavily a little while. The straps on her shoulders were wrapped and re-wrapped where they had bitten deep into the flesh and so were the laces of the snowshoes. The journey had taken its expected toll,—of both soul and body. The dreary shadows were heavy in the dark eyes.

For a moment she stood so, then she unfastened the harness with stiff fingers and dropped it from her body. Mechanically, as if there were no further incentive, the girl set about some preparation, while the man watched her, the gripping of his throat precluding speech. Slowly, heavily, like one tired of movement, she gathered a small pile of dead branches and brought them to the side of the sledge, laying them in reach of his hand.

Then from her belt she took the little box which held their matches. They rattled loosely, being few. These she laid on the covering beside the gun. Then she straightened to her old height, swiftly, easily, by some effort of the will. She swayed a bit where she stood.

"M'sieu," she said, "the ways part. By the

coming day there will be those on the trail who seek the forest. They will take the sledge to Henriette. Adieu, M'sieu,—and"—she caught her breath for a fleeting moment—"and the past is evened,—blotted,—what you will,—forgiven."

For one moment she looked down straight into the blue eyes of Angus McConnel and the dreary sickness of her soul swelled and swept across her, flooding her being with the old pain. Then she lifted her head, that regal head which still bore the semblance of its mighty pride, and turning, swung her body with the snowshoes' sweep toward that glowering North, which raised of a sudden its insistent voice and called to her, called to her from the ancient deeps where there lay Peace and Rest and the blessed quiet of Oblivion. Never had the mystic voice pealed from the Infinite with such aching profundity of sound, never had the erring, uncertain soul within her answered with such a leaping cry of faith and gladness.

Here was the end she had waited for, the fitting end of that life whose purpose was as the shimmering mists, whose worth was nothing and whose burden great.

It demanded naught of her now. The end was come when she might serve herself. With new strength she went toward the heavy forest, her lifted face peering into that fantastic North, and

upon it there lay the print of all weariness, all sadness, all failure.

As she went across the snow the man on the sledge opened his lips and struggled for speech, but his tongue was dumb. The horror in his throat gripped him to suffocation.

She was going back to the wilderness, going from him forever, going to a white and wandering death because she was sick unto it of life, truly and for many reasons, so sick that it was as if she went to her wedding, so glad was she to go. And with her went all light of the world, all hope of Heaven, all the meaning of life.

He struggled like a madman to rise, to cry out, stretching his arms toward her.

And the voice came back to his throat, rushing, strong, compelling.

"Lois Le Moyne!" he cried, and the call pealed like a clarion, "Lois! Lois! Lois!"

It reached her where she entered the depth of the great woods, reached her, rang on her soul like gold and stopped her where she stood, quivering. Her face was still raised to the North which called, but it listened, rapt, to the man who called.

"Lois! Lois Le Moyne! In the name of God come back to me!"

The cry of a man was in that call, the full cry of a man, strong, infinitely strong, a stern, com-

elling call that was a command, that lashed her spirit back across the snow to him as the master of old brought the woman he had conquered, that pulled at her body with a resistless strength. She flung up her arm and covered her face, and yet, she stayed as she had stopped, at the edge of the shadows, quivering, her whole being, soul and body, in one mighty tumult. And again came the mighty ringing cry, breaking at the end into anguish,—

“Lois! Lois! Oh, Lassie, winna ye come!”

It struck upon some chord that vibrated, that shivered and shook her to the foundations, that rang and echoed with its awful pleading and filled her with its might.

Some strange thing seemed to draw her toward the sledge and all she had abandoned, a wild, peculiar thrall which lured her backward. She shut her eyes against her arm and tried to shake her weary soul together, to gain that strength which seemed to be leaving her under this terrible spell. And still Angus McConnel from the sledge in the wide trail was forcing her toward him. Slowly she turned. Slowly, as if against her will, obeying some primal instinct which draws from the ends of the earth those perfect mates among the mighty ones, Lois Le Moyne went back, step by step, to the man upon the sledge.

His piercing eyes fixed on her in the magnitude of his effort, Angus McConnel waited, leaning forward with his hands clenched on the edge, his whole soul bent to his task.

The man spoke no more and the vast silence of the world seemed to settle hard upon them. It intensified the aching strain that held Lois, lent a note of tragedy. Fighting with all her tired spirit against this power which drew her backward to surrender, she stumbled step by step toward him, her weary feet uncertain, erratic. The face hidden in her arm was strangely contorted. The last of her very soul was struggling for all its pride, its right of rest, its heritage of freedom.

And suddenly, from out that vast and mystic North, some lone wild creature cried aloud in fear of the coming night. Once again she stopped.

It was no use. The great travail through which they two had passed had made this parting the only thing to be desired. She had wavered for the first time in all her dauntless life. Now she could not fail.

She shook herself to throw off this wild spell, as a huge dog shakes himself free of the hindering snow. Slowly the arm across her face lowered and she looked before her, dully.

Angus McConnel saw that look, saw her proud head turn from him for the last time in life, knew

that she had broken the spell with her superb strength.

Slowly she turned about and once more faced the end she had chosen, that fitting end to such a life as hers, the wild, strong end that is without fear.

As she began to retrace her steps toward the forest's edge Angus McConnel threw up his arms toward the grey heavens and screamed a prayer that was a command.

"Oh, God!" he cried terribly, "Gie Ye me my strength or let me die!"

And with all the power of his spirit, that strong spirit that had almost broken Lois Le Moyne, he flung himself off the seldge.

With shaking hands he tore himself free of the skin covering, tumbling the kitten out in the snow, where it set up a plaintive crying, and with all the blood of his body straining in his face he essayed to rise.

The heavy limbs were like dead. Once he threw himself forward—twice—. It seemed that all the feeling of a thousand ancestors was tearing in his body, thrilling him with a super-human strength.

He cast a glance to where that tattered figure staggered slowly away and gathered the last ounce of power in him.

Was it a miracle? Had that awful prayer reached the Great Power behind the grey sky? Who knows?

With a mighty lurch the man rose up and stood upon his feet. There was no thought in him of what he had done. He realised nothing save the figure so slowly leaving him, the imperative need to reach it.

Staggering, lumbering across the snow, his hands outstretched to grasp her, Angus McConnel walked!

It was a horrible journey had there been one to see. To him it was a triumphal march. He reached her at last, dropped a heavy hand upon her shoulder and clutched her in the very agony of rescue.

He swung her to him heavily and crushed her against his breast.

He pressed his face hard upon hers and kissed her as one might kiss the wakened dead. With the touch of him, the realisation of his body upright beside her, though it swayed drunkenly, Lois felt her soul broken within her and with a sob she went to him from the far spaces of her nature.

Her weary arms yielded themselves to his shoulders and with head dropped on his throat she wept as she had wept once in the cabin of Old Jaques.

On the face of the deposed Factor of Fort Lu

Cerne there was an answering rain of tears and he spoke from the troubled deeps:

“Lassie,” he said brokenly, “dinna ye ken I love ye? Oh, lassie! We hae done grievous wrong and we hae been punished beyond most, but so will we be blessed beyond most. Through blood and fire we hae come, but it has forged such a love as all the Northland has not seen! It has done a miracle — in my body it has done it! — and in our souls. Henriette waits and all our people. Come, lassie, let us go together — into Life!”

And gently, their arms about each other, their faces glorified, they went together back to the sledge and the crying kitten.

“M’sieu,” said Lois with a voice of gold,—the strange, sweet voice that Pierre Vernaise had heard once in his anguish,—“take to the sledge again. The miracle has been wrought, but we must guard it still.”

But McConnel in his wonder and his joy refused.

“Never again,” he cried. “Never again, lassie!”

“But see, M’sieu, I am strong now! And I would hurry to Henriette! The new blood pulls me forward. Will you not?”

For answer McConnel pointed to the kitten.

“Catch it and we will abandon the sledge and go forward together. I will never fail you again.”

And so presently it came that two figures, so closely clinging as to seem one, went forward in the beaten trail to Henriette. Lois had left her snowshoes with the sledge and with her strong young arms she clung to and guided the heavy, uncertain figure beside her.

At the first near turn a light shone out ahead,—that beacon which Marcel Roque, sure in her knowledge and her hope, had caused to be placed nightly in the northwest bastion of the post of Henriette!

“Ah, M’sieu,” said Lois softly. “See! We have found at last the meaning of this life of ours, and it is light and hope and all good things!”

“Amen!” said McConnel.

THE END

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